THE APPEAL TO BE HEARD AND THE TROPE OF LISTENING IN CLASSIC FILM AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

Mike Kolakoski

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As members of the Dissertation Committee, we certify that we have read the dissertation prepared by Mike Kolakoski, titled The Appeal to be Heard and the Trope of Listening in Classic Film and African American Literature and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

_____ Date: May 8, 1013
Charles Scruggs

_____ Date: May 8, 2013
Susan White

_____ Date: May 8, 2013
Lynda Zwinger

Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

_____ Date: May 8, 2013
Dissertation Director: Charles Scruggs

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SIGNED: Mike Kolakoski

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To all who have read the many manifestations of my argument presented below and to those who might take the time in the future to read the final product: may I say—quite simply but no less genuinely—thank you for listening.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes the narrative use of sound, the rhetorical appeal to be heard and the trope of listening in African American literature as well as Hollywood and international cinema. Contributing to the burgeoning fields of film sound and listening studies, Chapter One explores the relationship between the first experiments with synchronous sound recording technology and the construction of subjectivity along the lines of ethnicity, religion and gender in early talkies such as Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail*. Chapter Two surveys a range of abolitionist texts and select essays from the Civil Rights movement—particularly David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, Frederick Douglass's first autobiography *Narrative of the Life* and his novella "The Heroic Slave," W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and Richard Wright's *White Man, Listen!*—in order to review the role of listening across racial divides in the United States. Chapter Three analyzes the multiple ways in which listening functions for narrative purposes in Wright's best-selling novel, *Native Son*; and Chapter Four addresses the trouble with listening in Wright's posthumous novel *A Father's Law* and Hitchcock's first color film, *Rope*.

Contributing to film studies, gender studies, and critical race theory, this thesis argues that the act of listening comes to function figuratively as a trope, signifying not only a means of recognition, interpellation and subjugation of an Other but also an instrument of justice; a matter of politics; a means of education; a potential remedy for alienation, while at the same time working as a tool of oppression; a formative act in

familial and other social relations; a governing form of surveillance; an audial gaze, so to speak; a way to frighten, or more generally, evoke emotion; a part of the therapeutic process; an indication of trust or confidence; a manifestation of (sexual) desire; and, last but certainly not least, an age old form of entertainment forever transformed by sound technology of the industrial age.

INTRODUCTION

While focusing, for the most part, on Richard Wright and Alfred Hitchcock, my project surveys a range of African American literature and film from both sides of the Atlantic to investigate the construction of subjectivity via, what I call, the trope of listening. Indeed, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American literature and in film from Hollywood and beyond during the first half of the twentieth century, the act of listening comes to function figuratively as a trope, signifying not only a means of recognition, interpellation and subjugation of an Other but also an instrument of justice; a matter of politics; a means of education; a potential remedy for alienation, while at the same time working as a tool of oppression; a formative act in familial and other social relations; a governing form of surveillance; an audial gaze, so to speak; a way to frighten, or more generally, evoke emotion; a part of the therapeutic process; an indication of trust or confidence; a manifestation of (sexual) desire; and, last but certainly not least, an age old form of entertainment forever transformed by sound technology of the industrial age.

In many ways, my project speaks to the human drive toward recognition. As G.W.F. Hegel states in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, "Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or 'recognized'" (qtd. in Kojeve 229). Or, as Alexandre Kojeve puts it in *Lectures on* The Phenomenology of Spirit, "In order that mutual and reciprocal recognition, which alone can fully and definitively realize and satisfy man, be established, it suffices for the Slave to impose himself on the Master and be recognized by him" (21). While I find the binary language of slaves and masters rather

archaic and overly simplified, the desire of the Other—to use a more contemporary, if no less loaded, post-colonial term—for recognition undergirds my project. Twenty-five years ago, and well over a century after Hegel, Gayatri Spivak asked if the subaltern can speak. Now, I find it time to ask: if so, who listens?

In the following pages, I expand upon Spivak's subaltern subjects in order to discuss the representation of marginalized voices in literature and film more generally. The various ways in which listening and the appeal to be heard function in early film and African American literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is perhaps best exemplified by Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* (1927), Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929) and *Rope* (1948), Richard Wright's *A Father's Law* (1960)[i], *Native Son*—both his novel that was originally published in 1940 and Pierre Chenal's cinematic adaptation of it in 1951—and his collection of essays entitled *White Man, Listen!* (1957), as well as W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Frederick Douglass's novella "The Heroic Slave" (1853) along with his first autobiography in 1845, and lastly, David Walker's *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829).

One of the purposes of my dissertation is to highlight the influence of technology on the representation of and philosophy concerning listening, which is why, in Chapter One, I discuss the appeal to be heard in early talkies produced within and outside of the Hollywood studio system. The revolution of sound technology in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century that engendered telephones, radio broadcasts and talking films signaled a shifting social interest in listening. The technological innovations of the industrial age profoundly impacted the modes of listening offered to man; which is why,

in the opening of my dissertation, I take an historical approach to my project, arguing that modernity has irrevocably impacted the act of listening and how we think of it.

Vitaphone's development of the synchronous sound recorder, which Warner Brothers would employ in the production of *The Jazz Singer*, represents a flashpoint signifying the broader cultural appeal to be heard. As I discuss in Chapter One, Western Electric, the parent company of Vitaphone, hired Elton Mayo, Professor of Industrial Research in the Graduate School of Business Administration at Harvard University, to investigate the ways in which listening functions in labor relations in modern America. He discovered, among other things, the workers' desire to be heard,[ii] and consequently, charges employers to listen when workers speak or at least to feign the semblance of listening to the workers. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that *The Jazz Singer*, in production at Warner Brothers at the same time as Mayo was conducting his research for Western Electric, takes as its plot a tale in which a first-generation American Jew simply wants to be heard—not only by an adoring Broadway audience but also by his mother and father. For these reasons and more, I find the film to be a logical place to begin my project as it depicts the dialectical relationship between modern technology and contemporary constructions of subjectivity via the act of listening.

While many scholars discuss the technical aspects of sound in relation to *The Jazz Singer* few consider the role that listening plays as a narrative device in Warner Brothers' groundbreaking film. Therefore, in Chapter One, I move from a consideration of the technological developments that led to synch sound recording technology to a narrative analysis of the ways in which listening functions as a structuring element within the first

widely-recognized talkie. For example, I examine the relationship between listening and generational conflict in the opening scenes of the film, exploring the ways that listening functions as a means of engendering emotion and the ways that the refusal to listen functions as a manifestation of patriarchal power. I argue that the son's appeal to be heard denied by the father functions as a symbolic form of castration, with many of the commensurate psychological impacts in *The Jazz Singer*, just as it will in Richard Wright's last novel, *A Father's Law*, which I analyze in the fourth and final chapter of my dissertation. Through an analysis of the cinematography, editing and sound mixing in *The Jazz Singer*, I demonstrate the degree to which the film begs a discussion of listening as it informs our reading of Jack Robin's dynamic character. In addition, I discuss the ways in which a Jewish mother's affection is displaced onto the listening ear of Mary Doyle, a gentile who functions as the jazz singer's romantic partner as well as his path to stardom not only on Broadway but also in American society more generally.

While analyzing the ways in which listening functions to create inter-generational conflict and to establish relations across gender as well as religious lines in *The Jazz Singer*, I also discuss the role of listening in relation to jazz itself. Within jazz culture, a particularly talented performer is said to have "big ears," which implies an ability to listen so as to engage with the performance of other musicians in the group. I find it more than coincidental that the first feature film to utilize the synch sound technology that would change the way we think about listening took as its subject a jazz singer who had "big ears." Al Jolson's ability to listen not only enables the jazz singer to succeed as a performer onstage but also contributes to his overall character development throughout

the narrative, for in the end Jack Robin is able to remedy the strained relationship with his father, a Cantor on his deathbed back in New York, only after listening to another cantor perform in Chicago.

Of course, the appeal to be heard in early talkies extends beyond *The Jazz Singer*, beyond the studios of Hollywood and beyond the shores of America, which is why I include, in Chapter One, an analysis of Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929), the first talkie in British film history. As I argue, Hitchcock employs cinematic sound more creatively and effectively than Alan Crossland, the director of *The Jazz Singer*. For example, Hitchcock uses the point-of-audition in order, at first, to distance the audience from his protagonist's subjective position only later to suture us to Alice White's perspective via a similar cinematic use of sound. The director incorporates an historic shift from diegetic direct sound to the non-diegetic score in order to represent the psychological trauma inflicted on Alice (Anny Ondra, with the voice of Joan Barry) by the rape of the man she subsequently kills. As I go on to argue at the end of Chapter One, Hitchcock repeatedly manipulates the point-of-audition so as to emphasize the role of listening as it functions to construct subjectivity in his film.

While listening does not function so much along generational lines in Hitchcock's film, as it does in *The Jazz Singer*, it still functions within the context of a patriarchal system, mainly that of law enforcement. Alice White's boyfriend, Detective Frank Webber (John Longden), will stifle her attempts to tell her side of the story to the inspector. Frank's unwillingness to listen to Alice's desire to confess to Chief Inspector Walls (Harvey Braban) depicts his oppressive nature, which parallels the police's

unwillingness to listen to her at the end of the film and which in turn echoes the cops' refusal to listen to the anonymous man at the beginning of *Blackmail*. These instances in which male characters in a position of power refuse to listen to female characters take on greater significance when placed alongside the issue of rape, which lies at the heart of Hitchcock's first talkie. As I point out in Chapter One, the police officer on the beat outside of Crewe's apartment fails to hear Alice's cries for help when the artist, Mr. Crewe (Cyril Richard), assaults her in his apartment. The police man's inability, if not refusal, to listen is echoed in *Blackmail* not only by the police department's refusal to recognize Alice at the end of the film but also by other breakdowns in communication along gender lines that reverberate throughout the narrative. Alice represents a voice that too often goes unheard by the men in her life. Not unlike Crewe, who had refused to heed Alice's protestations in his apartment, her boyfriend—also the lead detective on the case—and his superiors do not listen to her as she adamantly wants to admit to the killing so as to have recognized Crewe's nefarious advances. As Tania Modleski points out, *Blackmail* "works to reduce Alice to a silent [or more precisely unheard] object between two male subjects" (19), but it also promotes her to a listening subject with whom filmgoers can identify, as I demonstrate at the conclusion of my first chapter.

Indeed, upon further analysis, the matter of listening proves to be more complex than first suspected. Of course, the appeal to be heard is not exclusively American, which is part of the reason why I include a discussion of the first British sound film in the opening chapter of my dissertation. On the contrary, the appeal to be heard is, in many ways, universal, which made my job all the more complicated when it came time to select

the primary texts for my dissertation; yet, as I hope to demonstrate in Chapter Two, the appeal to be heard is essential to the American experiment of democracy just as listening is fundamental to the American ethos of justice. While the verbs "to hear" and "to listen" appear neither in *The Declaration of Independence* nor in *The Constitution of the United States of America*, much of United States history revolves around the appeal to be heard; and perhaps no other genre of American discourse represents this appeal as vociferously, as persistently and as persuasively as African American literature, which is why I expand the scope of my project by analyzing, in the first-half of Chapter Two, the role of listening in abolitionist rhetoric from nineteenth-century America.

Many abolitionists employed the act of listening as a rhetorical means of overcoming the racial divides in nineteenth-century America. In 1829, through *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, David Walker argues that listening can function not only as a driving force toward a more perfect union stemming from the amelioration of race relations in antebellum America but also as a means of repentance and ultimate salvation for those who unjustly enslave, whom the author refers to as, God's children. Like Walker, twenty years later, Frederick Douglass employs the act of listening in his first autobiography, *Narrative of a Life*, and later in his novella "The Heroic Slave," as a means by which individuals may reform their consideration of African Americans (as human beings rather than brutes) and as a route to more benevolent race relations in America. Unlike Walker, however, in whose work the act of listening plays a relatively limited role, Douglas goes on to deploy the act of listening more figuratively as a means by which the oppressor instills fear, intimidation and a general sense of inferiority in the

mind of the oppressed; as a means of constructing subjectivity (of the slave and slaveholder alike); as a means of engendering desire; as a means of representing confusion and/or chaos in an increasingly industrial society; as a means of deconstructing institutional state apparatuses; as a means of conforming to or rebelling against social hierarchies; and, lastly, as a way of displaying the representative quality of the author. In short, listening comes to function as a trope in Douglass's writing.

Walker and Douglass's respective appeals to be heard exemplify the degree to which the act of listening was politicized in antebellum America. Moreover, their rhetorical strategies serve as exemplars for many writers to come concerned with civil rights in the twentieth century—in particular W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright. For *The Souls of Black Folk* and *White Man, Listen!*, respectively, represent the insistent appeal to be heard that resonates throughout African American discourse, signifying a legacy that sutures the civil rights leaders of the twentieth century to their nineteenth-century abolitionist forefathers. In *Souls*, Du Bois recounts the plethora of black voices, such as Walker and Douglass to name just two, who have represented the appeal to be heard as a means of social unification in America. Du Bois chronicles the many attempts throughout history to initiate points of transference between the races, as he calls it, only to argue that the failure of any such transference comes down more often than not to the inability or unwillingness of others to listen to such appeals. As I argue, one of Du Bois's intended purposes in *Souls* is to draw attention to the herculean feat of raising a nation's consciousness toward a social problem as formidable as slavery in the antebellum U.S. and segregation in Jim Crow America.[iii]

Like Du Bois, Richard Wright uses his non-fiction to address the psychological impact of going unheard. A la Walker, Wright focuses on the historical breakdown of communication across racial boundaries, and again not unlike Du Bois, he associates the act of reading, more often than not, with that of listening. Moreover, Wright argues in *White Man, Listen!* that being heard or recognized is a universal right, implying, as I argue, that listening may very well be a universal responsibility.

Throughout my dissertation, I refer to the rhetorical appeal to be heard as a trope. In his treatise on rhetoric, Aristotle discusses the ways in which such rhetorical strategies function:

> Appeals to the hearer aim at securing his good will, or at arousing his anger; sometimes at engaging his attention, or, on occasion, at diverting it—since engaging it is not always an advantage, and for that reason a speaker will often try to get his audience laughing […] Men pay attention to things of importance, to their own interests, to anything wonderful, to anything pleasant; and hence you must give the impression that your speech has to do with the like […] And further, if the hearer's attention must be caught, this may have to be done in all parts of the speech. (223-224)

As Lane Cooper argues in 1932 via his introduction to *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, the epic or dramatic writer (or the novelist, for that matter) must constantly use the art of rhetoric. Moreover, since "every one is alternately listener and speaker, or reader and writer, the *Rhetoric* thus becomes a popular treatise on the interest of men in groups and as individuals, a popular logic, and a popular account of the emotions, the memory, the

imagination, in hope and fear, and the will" (*xx*). As I explain in Chapter Two, many of the rhetorical appeals to be heard that Aristotle chronicles are represented in the work of nineteenth-century abolitionists and twentieth-century writers of the Civil Rights era; but it is the work of Richard Wright, in both his non-fiction, as I discuss in Chapter Two, and his novels, which I analyze in the final two chapters of my dissertation, that motivates my use of the phrase: trope of listening.

Wright's analysis of African American literature at the end of *White Man, Listen!* compels me to explore the ways in which the appeal to be heard, the politics of recognition and the trope of listening function in his more widely-recognized works of fiction. Despite the abundance of discourse concerning *Native Son*, there are few scholars or critics who explore the narrative use of sound in Wright's novel and even fewer who discuss the role of listening. Hence, in Chapter Three, I provide a close reading of Wright's bestselling novel—the first written by an African American to be recognized by the Book of the Month Club—in order to explore the various ways in which the author deploys the act of listening as a narrative device. I continue to investigate the role of listening along generational lines that I first discuss in Chapter One, while expanding my consideration of the role listening plays in race relations that I surveyed in Chapter Two. My analysis of *Native Son* also allows me to return to the role of listening as it functions across gender lines, which I initially discuss in Chapter One when analyzing Hitchcock's *Blackmail*. In some ways, Bigger Thomas seems to resemble Alice White in that, while having killed—for different reasons of course—both want the police to recognize the motivation behind such violent acts. Of course, the similarities between the two

characters stop there, for Alice remains, at the end of the film, unheard, while Bigger is heard, to some degree, at the conclusion of *Native Son*. Ultimately, Bigger seems closer to Alice's boyfriend or the man who rapes her, for like Frank and Crewe, he refuses to listen to his girlfriend, Bessie Mears, and such an unwillingness to listen is all the more confounding considering Bigger's dire need to be heard himself, which is expressed, as I will explicate, repeatedly throughout the novel.

In order to demonstrate the degree to which Wright emphasizes the role of listening and to justify my argument that it comes to function as a trope in his fiction, I analyze the different manifestations of *Native Son*. I pay particular attention to the changes that Wright made when revising his original manuscript for publication by the Book of the Month Club. Many of the requested changes led Wright to omit material deemed too sexually suggestive; however, one suggestion inspired the author to add material. Subsequently, Wright expanded a discussion between Mr. Dalton and his wife, an exchange to which Bigger listens and which leaves him feeling further alienated from his newfound surroundings. As I will go on to argue, the revised version for the Book of the Month Club indicates a conscious effort on the part of the author to employ listening for a range of narrative purposes. Similarly, there are changes Wright makes when adapting his novel into a screenplay that accentuate the role listening plays in his work. Suffice it to say that throughout the various manifestations of *Native Son*, be it in cinematic form or the different renditions of the novel, Wright persistently employs the act of listening (and at times it is more of an act than at others) to represent a form of obedience; a means of cultural consumption; a method of ideological indoctrination; a

means of evoking and registering emotion; a process of gathering information; a means of silencing, marginalizing and subjugating an Other; and lastly, a means of recognition and a potential remedy for an otherwise overwhelming sense of alienation in the modern world.

As I argue, the ways in which listening functions in Wright's novel are complicated. The willingness of Borris Max to listen to Bigger in the third and final book of *Native Son* seems to signal a breakthrough in race relations in the novel if not in American society writ large; however, the trouble with listening as it functions in Wright's novel becomes increasingly apparent upon further analysis. One of the objectives of my project is to differentiate *listening* from simply *hearing*. Max is perfectly able to hear the words coming out of Bigger's mouth but can he, despite his best intentions, actually listen? When it comes to the conclusion of *Native Son*, there is ample evidence from the text suggesting that Max is unable to comprehend what Bigger says. Wright's novel encourages us to contemplate not only the motives behind listening but also one's capacity to do so. If, in fact, Max does listen to Bigger at the end of *Native Son*, the next logical question is: why? For what purposes does Bigger's defense attorney listen? Moreover, at the end of the novel, Bigger seems to be speaking to himself more than anyone else. Still the question remains: who listens? Must we distinguish between Bigger (or Max, or any other character for that matter) as a listening subject and the omniscient ear of the narrator? As I will argue, Wright is very much concerned with such questions, and the author is not afraid to tackle other complexities concerning listening in modern America.

Listening plays a particularly significant role in the discourse on race relations in America, but Richard Wright was, in many ways, a humanist, which is why he would explore, later in his career, the narrative and social function of listening beyond the context of race. For these reasons and more, I investigate, in Chapter Four, the role of listening in another of Wright's adaptations—his final novel, which, as I argue, was inspired by Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948). By analyzing *Rope* alongside *A Father's Law*, I intend to unfurl the different ways in which listening functions in film and literature respectively. Moreover, I want to establish the indirect yet nonetheless significant relationship between Hitchcock and Wright, which to the best of my knowledge has not been explored by critics or scholars of either artist. By discussing *A Father's Law* in conjunction with *Rope*, I intend to contribute to Hitchcock studies by exploring the filmmaker's influence beyond cinema. Many scholars have explored the relationship between Hitchcock's work and the literary source material from which it was adapted and others have discussed his films in relation to psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Lacan, Freud and Nietzsche; but no one has written about Hitchcock's work in relation to Richard Wright or any other African American writer that I know of. Furthermore, I intend to contribute to the scholarship on Wright by heeding Paul Gilroy's charge in *The Black Atlantic*, placing the author's work in a broader cultural context and tracing the ways in which his narratives speak to Hollywood film and, more generally, Western philosophical traditions, such as those represented by Nietzsche's Zarathustra.

My project places a premium on listening and the ways in which it impacts human relations. My proposition is that narratives (particularly of the cinematic and literary

form) are spaces in which artists have explored and may continue to investigate the social and psychological functions of listening. I began my project by focusing on the unwillingness or inability of others to listen, and I argued on behalf of the ameliorative effects of listening; but, as my dissertation developed, I became increasingly interested in the trouble with or problems of listening. Hence, in order to explore the undesired consequences of listening, I turn in my fourth and final chapter to Wright's posthumous novel, *A Father's Law*, and Hitchcock's first color film, *Rope*, in which listening functions, in part, as a diabolical means of appropriation.

Again, by investigating the trouble with listening and the ways that Hitchcock and Wright use it to engender conflict in their respective narratives, I hope to provide a sobering counter-balance to the more idealistic (if not, at times, utopian) arguments regarding listening that I present in my first three chapters. When deconstructing the narrative use of sound and tracing the trope of listening in Hitchcock's film and Wright's novel, I will demonstrate how the figurative meaning of the verb "to listen" shifts throughout time and throughout narratives. Indeed, the act of listening becomes problematic in these texts when, for example, one takes too seriously what is intended as a joke. In other words, I will discuss how humor can complicate the listening situation. Deploying Michel Chion's theoretical work regarding the audio-visual contract, I will discuss the limits of listening without the confirmation of sight, i.e., without visual evidence to confirm the meaning of what one has merely heard. I will investigate how the representation of listening is complicated by narrative point-of-view (or more precisely, point-of-audition): for instance, do the characters in Wright's novel interpret the sounds

represented in the text along the same lines as the narrator? For that matter, how is the point-of-audition established in cinema and is it established similarly in literature? What about the trouble with listening to, learning from, and acting upon lessons delivered by misguided teachers, fathers, or more generally speaking, patriarchal authority figures? And then, there is the matter of listening with the intent of distorting or twisting what someone has said. Moreover, I discuss, in the fourth and final chapter, the ways in which cognitive dissonance manifests along the lines of listening. In other words, I explore how one goes about listening to what she or he does not want to hear—for the most significant problem with listening, as depicted in Hitchcock's *Rope* and Wright's *A Father's Law*, is the way in which it engenders an internal struggle in an already conflicted conscience.

At the heart of my project lies an argument regarding the role of listening in the construction of subjectivity. My work takes as a premise the assumption that the subjugated voice can speak (or should I say, be represented) in order to ask a simple but necessary follow-up question: who listens? Why do we listen when we do? When we fail to listen, why? What are the implications of listening? How does listening differ from hearing? Quite simply: whence comes the desire to be heard? Whose responsibility is it to listen? And how do literary and cinematic narratives serve as sites in which we may ponder such questions?

CHAPTER ONE: TO FALL ON DEAF EARS: THE NARRATIVE USE OF SOUND AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF SUBJECTIVITY IN EARLY TALKING-PICTURES

"'You ain't heard nothin' yet'"
—Jack Robin in *The Jazz Singer*

"'Yes, let's hear what she has to say'"
—Inspector Walls in *Blackmail*

The Jazz Singer (1927), the first widely distributed film with synchronous dialogue, depicts the significance of listening in early-twentieth-century society. As it will in another groundbreaking sound film, Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929), listening to the cries of the suppressed human voice functions as a significant if seldom recognized theme in *The Jazz Singer*. Alan Crosland's film opens not with synchronous dialogue, as might be expected, but with an inter-title card that implicitly announces the role that listening will play in the narrative: "In every living soul, a spirit cries for expression—perhaps this plaintive, wailing song of Jazz is, after all, the misunderstood utterance of a prayer" (0:01:45). This opening line of the film begs the question: misunderstood by whom? The pursuit of an answer to such questions drives the narrative action and the audience's interpretation of the film as a whole not to mention my exploration of the trope of listening more generally throughout *The Jazz Singer* and *Blackmail*.

The revolutionary technology allowing for Warner Brothers' incorporation of synchronous sound into cinematic narratives engendered a renewed emphasis on the act of listening. In *Theory of the Film*, Béla Balázs instructs directors to practice the listening skills poets have honed for ages: "The meaning of a floorboard creaking in a deserted

room, a bullet whistling past our ear, the deathwatch beetle ticking in old furniture, and the forest spring tinkling over the stones. Sensitive lyrical poets always could hear these significant sounds of life and describe them in words. It is for the sound film to let them speak to us more directly from the screen" (197-198). The juxtaposition of poetry and the act of listening in Balázs's aesthetic philosophy is no coincidence. After all, the German film theorist is, however unwittingly, echoing Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay "Poetry." For Balázs and Emerson alike, "the poet listens to conversation and beholds all objects in Nature, to give back, not them, but a new and transcendent [representation of a] whole" (Emerson 6). Listening functions in Emerson's and Balázs's respective theories as an interpretative skill and implies an ability to render significant the sounds an artist hears. Balázs proceeds to theorize cinema's ability to manipulate the listening audience for narrative purposes:

> When the director will be able to *lead our ear* as he could once already lead our eye in the silent film and by means of such guidance along a series of close-ups will be able to emphasize, separate, and bring into relation with each other the sounds of life as he has done with its sights, then the rattle and clatter of life will no longer overwhelm us in a lifeless chaos of sound. The sound camera will intervene in this chaos of sound, form it and interpret it, and then it will again be man himself who speaks to us from the sound screen. (198-199)

Since Balázs's plea, many directors have in fact led our ear. Indeed, the first talkies, which introduced synchronous dialog to filmgoers around the world, enabled filmmakers to employ the act of listening in profound ways. As I argue below, in Alan Crosland's

The Jazz Singer and in Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail* listening functions as a means of recognition, interpellation and subjugation of an Other; as an instrument of justice; as both a potential remedy for alienation, and at other times, a tool of oppression; as a formative act in familial and other social relations; as a form of entertainment; and, perhaps most importantly for my argument, as a trope around which the filmmakers structure their respective narratives.

Considering these manifestations of the trope of listening in cinema's earliest films with synchronous sound, it should come as little surprise that it also runs through much of the film criticism concerning cinematic sound. In the introduction to *Unheard Melodies*, her book on narrative film music, Claudia Gorbman depicts the act of listening as it so often functions in film studies. If, she argues, Marxist and Freudian theory have "forever destroyed the romance of the autonomous perceiving subject, and if recent film theory has taken on among its primary missions to understand the historical, psychological, and textual positioning of the cinematic spectator, we need to start *listening* to the cinema's uses of music in order to read films in a literate way" (my emphasis 2). Like Balázs, Gorbman focuses on cinema's ability to manipulate the audience. There is a unique listening subject; therefore, we must explore the many ways in which the listener is constructed. Furthermore, in *Unheard Melodies*, Gorbman equates the function of listening with the act of reading, which will become increasingly relevant to my argument in subsequent chapters concerning the trope of listening.

Gorbman echoes the work of Anahid Kassabian, Caryl Flinn, Kaja Silverman[iv] and Michel Chion, to name only a few of the film scholars concerned with the cinematic

use of sound who implicitly address and more explicitly employ the act of listening in their respective analyses. When writing, in *Hearing Film*, about a formative experience listening to film sound, Kassabian:

> can hear it as if it were yesterday. I was sitting in a classroom, "watching" John Cassavetes's *A Woman Under the Influence*. My heart broke every time I heard Gena Rowlands sing the "Dying Swan," and my eyes welled with tears at the image of a black laborer singing "Celeste Aida" for a dozen of his coworkers at the breakfast table of this tortured, crazy Italian-American lady. Why, I wondered, did none of the course readings, and none of the readings in any other courses, care about or try to explain this experience? (1)

Kassabian goes on to provide an insightful analysis of the role of music in film and the processes of identification inherent in cinema, joining the chorus of critics who have in recent decades addressed the cinematic use of sound. Of particular importance to my argument is the emotion evoked in Kassabian by the act of listening to Gena Rowlands or the minority laborer, for, as I will discuss below, the act of listening functions similarly in *The Jazz Singer* as a means of producing an emotional response diegetically from characters and non-diegetically from audiences.

Over a decade before *Hearing Film*, Caryl Flinn discusses the ease with which those of us writing about sound can claim originality: "After all, [film sound] has scarcely received the kind of critical attention that genres like the Western have, nor has it sparked the level of animated debate that film editing has over the years. Yet to call it neglected is, I think, to overstate the case" (*Strains of Utopia* 3). In the discourse on film

sound, it is ironic that we ignore or, in a metaphorical if not always a literal sense, fail to listen to those who have come before us. It points, at least indirectly, to the problems with or difficulties of listening. The cinematic use of music plays a formative role in Flinn's work, as it does in the scholarship of Kassabian and Gorbman, but I am more interested in the ways that listening functions in their respective texts and in twentieth-century critical theory, film and literature more generally. My argument calls for a reprioritization of the audial-visual contract inherent to the cinematic process and a shift of focus away from the production of sound, be it in the form of music, effects or dialog, to the reception of sound, be it within or without the diegesis.

While film theorists have yet to develop a cogent theory concerning the role of listening in the construction of subjectivity, filmmakers have broached the topic and, throughout the history of cinema, employed it as a structuring element in their narratives. Take, for instance, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first widely recognized feature film to utilize, however frugally, synchronous dialog, or *Blackmail* (1929), the first talkie in British film history.

The pursuit and implementation of synchronous sound recording technology in Hollywood stemmed from a burgeoning popular appreciation of listening. Sam Warner, the youngest of the four Warner siblings, initiated his company's pioneering move to synchronous sound recording technology, while "Paramount, MGM, and United Artists had decided to wait at least one year before committing to sound" (Schatz 61-64). A first-generation son of Polish immigrants, Sam Warner had a great interest in radio broadcast technology. In 1927, he visited Bell Telephone laboratories where he heard, so to speak,

the future of motion pictures. By that time, radio had "really started to assault the population." According to Scott Eyman, that's "when radio stations started popping up across the country, and people became fascinated with this sound that was coming through the air—that's what primed the pump for sound and film—it was radio" (qtd. in *The Dawn of Sound* 0:11:36). Eyman points to the legacy of listening as a form of entertainment. The appeal of listening did not begin with the invention of cinematic sound, in fact it may very well be timeless, but it was certainly amplified with the implementation of synchronous sound recording technology. According to Robert Gitt of UCLA's Film and Television Archive, "Nathan Levinson, who worked for Western Electric, was in Los Angeles installing Warner Brothers' radio station, KFWB, and he told Sam Warner about some demonstrations that he'd seen of talking pictures back in New York City" (qtd. in *The Dawn of Sound* 0:12:03). The installation of the station and Sam Warner's subsequent meeting with Levinson was serendipitous as it concerns the future of Warner Brothers studios specifically and cinema's transition to sound film more generally. Sam Warner dragged his older brother to this presentation "without telling him what the demonstration was about and Harry was seduced, instantly seduced" (Eyman qtd. in *The Dawn of Sound* 0:15:33). As the story goes, two months after listening to the demonstration, Warner Brothers partnered with Western Electric to make films using the latter's Vitaphone Sound System.

Warner Brothers' foresight, to co-opt for cinematic purposes the appeal of listening engendered by radio broadcast technology, led to significant commercial box-office success. According to an anecdote recounted in Ted Sennett's *Warner Brothers*

Presents: The Most Exciting Years—from The Jazz Singer *to* White Heat, Sam Warner's enthusiasm for Vitaphone technology mirrored public sentiment at the time: "By the spring of 1927, the public was enthusiastic about sound." Such enthusiasm continued through the premiere of *The Jazz Singer* on October 6 of the same year: "With the closing notes echoing in their ears, first-nighters rose to give [Al] Jolson and the film a tumultuous ovation. At that moment, motion pictures were on the threshold of a new era." The public began to flock to movie houses to listen to any sounds emanating from the screen, "however scratchy or incoherent" (Sennett 13-17). Listening had become an essential aspect of cinematic entertainment.

Around the same time as Warner Brothers' move to synchronous cinematic sound recording, Western Electric, the company responsible for producing Vitaphone, had hired Elton Mayo, Professor of Industrial Research in the Graduate School of Business Administration at Harvard University, to conduct what would become known as the "Hawthorne Experiment." Via a sophisticated interview process, Mayo et al. concluded that workers were more productive when their voices were thought to be heard by management:

> Very briefly stated, the present method may be outlined as follows: the interviewer is introduced to the employee, and the interviewer "catches on" in a conversational way at any starting point mentioned by the employee. As long as an employee talks the interviewer follows his comments, displaying a real interest in what the employee has to say and taking sufficient notes to enable him to recall the employee's comments. While the employee continues, no attempt is made on the part of the interviewer to

> change the subject because it is a basic assumption of the method that, where the employee chooses his own topics, he chooses them partly in their order of importance for him. If the interviewer were to ask questions or to redirect the employee's comment to other topics or subjects, he would in a sense ask the employee to talk upon a subject…not necessarily at all important to the employee. The interviewer takes part in the conversation only in so far as it is necessary to keep the employee talking and to stimulate confidence…The more skilled the conduct of an interview, the better its effect upon the employee. He not only says more and of more intimate topics but in the process of talking he discovers new interpretations for himself. (86-87)

Mayo et al. discovered that the appeal to be heard satisfied by the act of listening can lead to a greater recognition of self, an argument not unlike my own as it relates to the construction of subjectivity in cinematic narratives employing synchronous sound recording technology.

In *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*, Michael Rogin describes the significant relationship between Mayo's work and *The Jazz Singer*:

> The "Hawthorne experiment" is as germinal in industrial sociology as *The Jazz Singer* is in the history of film, and the two have speaking in common. Getting workers to talk and feel listened to, the company discovered, increased productivity more than did the effort to create silent, efficient human machines. Talk, encouraged as inner self-expression, functioned as social control. In

> production as in consumption, in work as at play, the company stood behind the workers' words, Jolson to their blackface. "Master Minstrel" Al Jolson models the dreams of his fans, dreams produced socially for private consumption and ventriloquized as one's own. Freed from traditional cultural and communal restraints, the jazz singer becomes a component part of standardized organizations and standardized dreams. To cover up that mode of production, blackface-realism had to go. For it exposed the illusion that the individual was speaking and not being spoken for—whether by language, capital, the mass consumption industries, or by the locus of all three. (Rogin 119)

Rogin identifies the potential problems inherent to listening: on the one hand, the appeal to be heard corresponds with a desire for recognition, while on the other hand, it leads to a form of oppression resulting from social control. Considering the connection drawn by Rogin between the "Hawthorne Experiment" and *The Jazz Singer*, it should come as no surprise that the first widely distributed film with synchronous dialog begins with a title card implicitly addressing the importance of listening.

It is worth noting that the inaugural title card in the film is conspicuously absent from the final, pre-production screenplay by Alfred A. Cohn. Rather than focusing on the misunderstood prayers of the jazz singer, Cohn's screenplay begins with the second title card to appear in the film, the text of which is super-imposed over an image of a New York City street bustling with the business of the day: "'The New York ghetto, the daily life of which throbs to the rhythm of music that is as old as civilization.'" This title card, which opens Cohn's screenplay, focuses on the city and its inhabitants who listen to the

kind of music Cantor Rabinowitz (Warner Oland) wishes his son would perform instead of jazz. Counter-intuitively, the city, in this opening title card, is associated with the ancient or traditional. More importantly, for my argument, Cohn's opening title card, like the Cantor, fetishizes the significance of listening to religious hymns, but the latter will be unable or unwilling to consider the role that listening to jazz plays in his son's life.

When analyzing the trope of listening as a structural element in narratives concerned with the construction of subjectivity, it would behoove us to compartmentalize characters into *subjects* (who listen or fail to do so) and *objects* (who are heard or fail to be heard). Furthermore, when thinking specifically about the representation of listening in film, we should make every effort to analyze the image track as closely as the soundtrack, for the magic of cinema, as Michel Chion reminds us in *Audio-Vision*, depends on the dialectical relationship between image and sound.

The first sounds of Jakie Rabinowitz at age thirteen performing onstage in New York City are accompanied by the images of three distinct audience members listening to young Jakie. After being introduced, Jakie steps from the side of the piano toward the audience and the camera, commencing to sing the first notes of synchronous sound-and-image in Hollywood history. More importantly for my argument, the film cuts to a reverse-shot of five characters, all appearing to listen intently to Jakie's performance. Three gentlemen stand framed in the doorway and in focus as opposed to the two characters seated in the foreground. Four of the actors in this shot are in formal costuming—suits, ties, a dress and feathered hat—however, the actor situated in the center of

Figure 1

the shot (standing both between and slightly in front of the other two men in the doorway donning suits) is wearing overalls and holding a brush and a can of paint. The blocking of a painter listening to Jakie Rabinowitz amidst a crowd of relatively elite members of society begs for an analysis of class as it relates to the role of listening. Indeed, Jakie's performance gains the attention of blue- and white-collar audiences alike, a point rendered more significant in light of Mayo's work with Western Electric, which as noted above, concludes that the process of listening was relevant to the working class. Does the working-class painter identify with the performance? The rest of the film provides little to merit such a line of inquiry; but I will return to a discussion of class as it relates to the act of listening below when analyzing Hitchcock's *Blackmail*.

It is important to note that the act of listening, as it will function in relation to the construction of gender in *The Jazz Singer*, is foreshadowed in this opening scene when the shot of the working-class painter cuts to an image of a woman listening to young Jakie sing. After a long shot of the concert hall, the film returns to the image of the

Figure 2

woman, anticipating the importance of female characters in Jakie's life, particularly in the figures of his mother and Mary Dale (May McAvoy), each of whom will listen to the jazz singer and serve as catalysts in the narrative. The return shot of the woman listening to Jakie sing in the opening scene of the film signifies the film's emphasis on gender as it relates to listening subjects. In fact, the image of one woman is doubled by the faint image of another woman's face, positioned in the upper-right hand corner of the frame just over the left shoulder of the female character in the foreground. In many ways, the

act of listening is romanticized in *The Jazz Singer* particularly along the lines of gender. Most, if not all, of the women in Jackie Rabinowitz's life are devoted listeners and their actions benefit the jazz singer's life.

However, *The Jazz Singer* does not entirely romanticize the act of listening. In fact, listening functions problematically during some of the more formative scenes in the film. For example, the images of the painter and other audience members are proceeded by a sequence of shots of Moisha Yudelson (Otto Lederer), who, according to the inter-title card, is "rigidly orthodox and a power in the affairs of the Ghetto" (0:08:02). In these opening scenes of the film, Yudelson fails to recognize the plaintive cry of the young jazz singer. The sequence of shots during which Yudelson discovers Jakie singing in the tavern is as important as sound when representing and analyzing the act of listening, for the shots of Yudelson gazing from behind the swinging doors separating the barroom from the stage hall represent an array of reactions to what the character hears. In the first two images reproduced below, with his eyes looking down (off-screen-left), Yudelson appears to enjoy the heretofore-anonymous singer's performance. The third shot in the

Figure 3

sequence I have reproduced here, represents a repositioning of Yudelson's gaze as he is now looking up (off-screen-right). The audience is informed, by a sequence of shot/reverse shots, that Yudelson realizes who is singing onstage to his left. Yudelson's look of enjoyment and appreciation in the first few frames of this sequence quickly turns to one of perplexity if not downright disgust in the final shots. In response to what he

hears and, ultimately, sees, Yudelson exits the venue and runs to report the matter to his friend Cantor Rabinowitz, Jakie's father.

As Mayo et al. discovered when conducting the "Hawthorne Experiment", the act of listening, no matter how well intended, can lead to a form of social control. After learning from Yudelson of the reason why his son is missing on the very eve that Jakie is to perform the Kol Nidre prayer in the synagogue, Cantor Rabinowitz storms out of his family's apartment. He enters the stage hall through the doors marked "family entrance"—the mise-en-scene here emphasizing the patriarchal conflict unfolding not only during this scene but also throughout the course of the narrative. With the camera positioned behind the Cantor as he opens the doors, we see Jakie singing and dancing to the crowd, positioned in the frame directly over the Cantor's left shoulder. The scene cuts to a head-on medium shot of the wide-eyed father and then to a reverse shot of Jakie, which re-establishes the synchronous sound of the young jazz singer's performance of "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee" that has continued to play on the soundtrack and creates one of the earliest sound bridges in Hollywood history. The scene then cuts to a shot filmed from a camera positioned just outside of the hall, for we see the Cantor make a mad dash into the hall and toward the stage. A long dolly shot tracking the length of the hall follows, which is significant as it clearly depicts the piano player accompanying Jakie onstage with his back to the audience and thus unable to witness the Cantor's approach. As will be the case throughout the film, the lyrics sung by Jakie during this scene are informative as they represent the trope of listening and influence our interpretation of the image track: "Watch them shuffle along / See them shuffle along /

Oh, take your best gal, your real pal / Go down to the levee / I said to the levee / And join

Figure 4

that shuffling throng / Hear that" (0:10:49). Immediately after the young jazz singer utters this last line, the scene cuts to a close-up of Jakie, who spies his father encroaching upon the stage, and the soundtrack cuts to silence. At first, the silence can be read as in synch with the image track as we see and hear Jakie stop singing. However, considering the previous establishing shot of the entire stage hall which frames the piano player with his back to the audience, it is only logical to assume that the pianist would have continued to play at least a few more measures of the song until he realized that Jakie had in fact stopped singing. But since we hear the piano stop at the same time Jackie stops singing, we should interpret the film's cut to complete silence as non-diegetic. After all, there is little if any chance that the stage hall was suddenly devoid of sound altogether. All this close reading is to point out that the non-diegetic silence would seem to indicate the filmmakers' attempt to emphasize the consequences of the Cantor's behavior for it, metaphorically speaking, castrates his son and the synchronous sound. The menacing intrusion of the father is echoed in more classical Hollywood terms by the sound of orchestral strings playing what will become one of the film's leitmotifs.

In addition to functioning as a form of patriarchal control, the act of listening functions in this part of the film as a means of evoking emotion. Shots of the father dragging his son by the collar through the streets are crosscut with images of Sara Rabinowitz (Eugenie Besserer) making the last preparations for dinner. When the Cantor storms into the apartment with his son in tow, there is no synchronous sound. As it will

so often throughout, the film operates here according to conventions of silent cinema; nevertheless, the act of listening continues to function as a structuring element of the momentarily silent narrative. Sara appears to plead with her husband, while Jakie breaks free from his father's grip and leaps into his mother's arms. A close-up of their embrace emphasizes the relationship between mother and son, foreshadowing the role that Sara will play in later scenes. Jakie's mother grabs her husband by his lapel and continues to plead for him to excuse their son's actions. A title card relates the Cantor's thoughts to his wife and the audience: "I'll teach him better than to debase the voice God gave him!" In opposition to her husband, the patriarch of the family, Sara argues: "But Papa—our boy, he does not think like we do" (0:11:34-0:11:42). A cut to a close-up of Jakie, with a glimmer of hope in his eyes as he watches the drama unfold between his parents, cues the audience's reaction to this scene. Along with Jakie, we hope the Cantor will listen to his wife but the proceeding title card indicates otherwise: "First he will get a whipping!" (0:11:56). As the dramatic non-diegetic score accompanies a close-up of Jakie, who has just been thrown against the wall by his father, a title card indicates the consequences of the Cantor's actions: "If you whip me again, I'll run away—and *never come back!*" (0:12:07). The Cantor responds to his son's warning by pushing Jakie into the next room and closing the door behind them. Significantly, as it concerns my argument, the camera remains in the main living room not only to hide the abusive scene from the audience but also to display the image of a distraught mother forced to listen to her husband beat their son. Sara continues to plead through closed doors on her son's behalf but to no avail. To

Figure 5

represent the horror of this scene, she covers her ears repeatedly. In this case, the act of listening signifies anguish if not sheer terror. The camera pans to follow Sara as she collapses onto a couch. Jakie returns from the bedroom with a defeated look on his face, while in the background, the Cantor refastens his belt, confirming what we had already assumed had happened behind closed doors. Once again, Jakie seeks comfort in the arms of his mother, but a close-up of his face with eyes turned back toward the room in which his father beat him indicates that he does not believe she can shelter him from his father's wrath. Placing a rather patronizing kiss on his mother's forehead, Jakie stands up and exits the frame. A quick shot of the Cantor emerging from the bedroom is proceeded by a shot of Jakie escaping out of the apartment through the front door. The scene returns to another shot of Sara sitting on the couch. The Cantor walks over to her and, while hovering above, tries to console her by placing his arm around her; however, the window in the background opens, illuminating the Star of David and signaling the commencement of the Kol Nidre prayer. All he can say to his wife is that it is time to prepare for the services, to which the despondent mother says, as if not even acknowledging the father's command: "Our boy has gone, and he is never coming back" (0:13:37). The father's inability to listen extends to his marital relations as the Cantor exits the frame (screen-left). The match-on-action of the Cantor grabbing his prayer shawl and walking out the front door mimics the son's abandonment only moments earlier. The proceeding cut to a shot of Sara on the couch and alone in the apartment accentuates the effect of this opening scene on her character. She looks up and off-screen-left as the scene cuts to a reverse shot of a photograph of young Jakie hanging on the wall. The scene fades to

black as Sara clutches her apron with a look of despair on her face. This opening scene clearly establishes the trajectory of the narrative. In a metaphorical sense, the father castrates his son's voice onstage just as he will cut short Jack Robin's voice as he sings "Blue Skies" to his mother in a later scene. Furthermore, this opening scene establishes the failure of the father to listen to his wife, the consequences of which, no matter how significant, too often go unrecognized in the academic discourse concerning *The Jazz Singer*.

Years after running away from home as a child, the jazz singer displaces his desire to captivate his mother's ear with that of Mary Dale. The first image we see of

Figure 6

Mary in San Francisco represents a woman in the act of listening. Descending the stairs at Coffee Dan's, she stops and gestures for her acquaintances to pay attention to the jazz singer onstage. Once seated at a table, her enchantment becomes even more pronounced: "Mary, attracted by his voice, looks away from the group wonderingly as she listens." According to Cohn's screenplay, she "is looking up at Jack curiously as she listens. This is something new to her" (73). The way in which Mary looks up at Jack (off-screen-right) and then down (off-screen-left) away from the stage signifies the degree to

Figure 7

which she concentrates on the voice she hears (0:23:12). As we saw with Yudelson in the opening scene, the visual cues of a listening subject depend very much on the actor's eyeline. Moreover, the dialog between Mary and Jack, after he has finished performing

and is summoned over to her table, reinforces the way in which the act of listening functions as a means of recognition: "'I think your voice would get you a long ways on the big time—you sing jazz, but it's different—there's a tear in it'" (76). Unlike Jack's father, Mary is able to hear the plaintive cry in the jazz singer's voice to which the opening title card of the film refers. She says what he needs to hear, so to speak. In this instance, Jack assumes the role of the listening subject. Listening functions as a means by which Jack regains a sense of confidence. After all, according to the screenplay, Jack "has been buffeted about so much that he has long since lost confidence in his own ability" (76). Indeed, Mary Dale discovers Jack Robin's voice and says as much to the jazz singer, who, "close to a tear now himself" (Cohn 76), articulates his gratitude. Furthermore, her comment defines Jack as relevant beyond the context of a jazz hall, which as we will see is significant considering his eventual return to his father and his decision to continue the legacy of cantors in the Rabinowitz family. The film's editing emphasizes such significance as a scene in which Cantor Rabinowitz is teaching a pupil back in New York immediately follows this scene at Coffee Dan's.

Prior to the shots linking the jazz singer to Mary, we encounter Jack eating a pre-performance meal at Coffee Dan's. Flapping his elbows up and down in rhythm with the song playing on the soundtrack, Jolson emphasizes the fact that his character is listening to and appreciating the music being played by an off-screen source. The act of listening here functions as a means of experiencing pleasure and as a method of education, which is not coincidental, for perhaps more than any other form of music, jazz depends on the musician's ability to listen: "In jazz circles, if someone says you have 'big ears,' you

have to feel good about that. 'Big ears' is high praise. Players and listeners (and jazz players are listeners) with 'big ears' are equipped to hear and engage complexity as it happens" (Rustin and Tucker 1). Listening is a skill, lacking in the father, which will allow Jack, not unlike Jolson in real life, to climb the ranks of popular entertainment.

In addition to the need for "big ears" so as to be a jazz singer, the ability to listen is crucial to Jack's overall development as a dynamic character in *The Jazz Singer*. After he learns that Mary is headed to New York City to pursue her career as a dancer, Jack makes a seemingly impromptu decision to attend a special matinee finale of sacred songs by Cantor Rosenblatt in Chicago. The scene sutures the first half of the melodrama, during which young Jakie leaves home, with the jazz singer's return to New York, creating a form of cinematic chiasmus. If, as *The Jolson Story* (1946) suggests, the story of *The Jazz Singer* parallels the real-life of Al Jolson, the attitude of Jack's father echoes the real life sentiments of Cantor Rosenblatt. As Cantor Bernard Beer, the director of the Belz School of Jewish Music at Yeshiva University in New York, states in an interview with National Public Radio in 2010: "Here's a cantor who feels that opera is not compatible with his calling as a cantor. Because of that, his engagements doubled and tripled. Audiences wanted to hear and see this cantor who turned down, in 1918, a thousand dollars a night to sing" (Jaffe). The scene that incorporates Cantor Rosenblatt's performance into the narrative of *The Jazz Singer* is particularly interesting considering the Cantor's position concerning popular entertainment: "Rosenblatt turned down $100,000 to play a part in the first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer*, for the same reasons that he said no to the opera [ten years earlier]. Still, Warner Brothers *had* to have him. So

they threw a scene into the movie where Rosenblatt, playing himself, appears in concert" (Jaffe). The scene of Cantor Rosenblatt is crucial to the narrative development of the jazz singer. A long shot of the Cantor onstage in front of a packed house establishes the size of the hall and represents the magnitude of the Cantor's performance (0:32:43). The fact that all of the audience members who are visible on-screen in the first five rows are already seated highlights by contrast the entrance of Jack, who is being escorted to his seat near the front of the stage by an usher. The scene, which will focus more on the jazz singer than the Cantor, cuts to a close-up of Jack sitting down and looking up at the stage with a melancholic expression on his face.

The sequence of shot/reverse shots in this scene is crucial to our appreciation of the thoughts and emotions that the act of listening evokes in the jazz singer. The close-up of Jack cuts to an American shot of the Cantor onstage and then back to another close-up of Jack, who bows his head down (screen-right) at first and then back up (screen-left) with a contemplative look on his face. The image track in this scene provides us with

Figure 8

crucial information regarding the thoughts running through Jack's mind as he listens to the Cantor, for when Jack looks back up (screen left), the eyeline match informs us that he is enraptured with the Cantor's performance onstage. The scene cuts to a medium shot of the Cantor onstage with the audience members seated in the front row visible in the foreground. A remarkable use of superimposition informs us of the relationship, in Jack's mind, of Cantor Rosenblatt's performance with that of his father. The blocking of Cantor Rosenblatt onstage in Chicago matches that of Cantor Rabinowitz in the synagogue back

in New York, suturing the one to the other literally on screen and figuratively in Jack's mind. The soundtrack that bridges the superimposition does not cut with the transition

Figure 9

from the Chicago music hall to the synagogue where Cantor Rabinowitz performs for his congregation. The establishing long shot inside the synagogue cuts to an American shot of Cantor Rabinowitz, and the soundtrack—unsynchronized with Cantor Rabinowitz's lips—sutures the scene and aligns the cinematic audience inside the mind of Jack, who imagines his father in the synagogue while listening to Cantor Rosenblatt in Chicago. The crosscutting, from the music hall to the synagogue, is further situated inside the mind of Jack by the cut to a close-up of the jazz singer again looking down (screen-left) in deep contemplation. Jack returns his gaze up, presumably refocusing his attention on Cantor Rosenblatt; but rather than cutting to a shot of Cantor Rosenblatt performing onstage in Chicago, as in the sequence of shot/reverse shots at the beginning of this scene, the image of Jack cuts into an American shot of his father in the synagogue. Cantor Rabinowitz's lips remain out-of-synch with the soundtrack, maintaining sonically our position with Jack in Chicago. Ironically, the first film to employ synchronous sound and image also employs the use of non-synchronicity for narrative purposes. The film dissolves from the images of Cantor Rabinowitz in the synagogue back to those of Jack sitting in attendance listening to Cantor Rosenblatt in Chicago. Jack nods his head up-and-down ever so slightly, indicating some sort of revelation that has come to mind. The scene cuts to a long shot of Cantor Rosenblatt and back to Jack, who again shakes his head in seeming

Figure 10

astonishment, then fades to black. If nothing else, the first talkie in Hollywood history demonstrates the contract between the soundtrack and the image track as it relates to the cinematic representation of listening.

In addition to representing the evolving relationship with his father, listening functions, later in the film, as a means of depicting the son's taboo erotic relationship with his mother. The opening scenes discussed above, in which Cantor Rabinowitz drags his son by the collar through the streets of New York, mirror the older Jack Robin's return home after he has earned his professional break on Broadway. As Robin Wood points out in relation to Alfred Hitchcock's work, which I will discuss below, such symmetry functions to emphasize the changes that have taken place throughout the film: "What the symmetry marks most obviously and strongly is neither finality nor the restoration of an earlier order, but *difference*" (250). In an establishing shot, the camera pans to follow Jack hustling down the New York City streets, perhaps signifying, in relation to the opening scenes, the young man's newfound independence. Once the camera is positioned inside the Rabinowitz's apartment, we see Jack framed in the doorway as he returns home. As he looks pensively around the room, the shot is interrupted by a crosscut to the Cantor teaching at the synagogue. The use of the crosscutting here foreshadows the tension between estranged father and son that will mount throughout this scene. A close-up reveals Jack gazing off-screen-left as a smile creeps over his face, and we see him mouth the word "momma" (0:40:59). The scene cuts to a medium shot of Sara Rabinowitz cooking on the range with her back to the camera. Jack's mother slowly turns her head toward the camera, eyes fluttering up-and-down as if

she cannot believe what she presumably just heard—the sound of her long-lost son's voice. This sequence of shots represents the act of listening as it functions without the use of synchronous dialog.

The act of listening proceeds to function as a means by which a mother expresses her love for her son, whether such love is platonic or erotic, as Rogin and others have intimated. After informing her of his new job, Jack leads his mother into the living room where he will echo his now famous line first uttered in the scene at Coffee Dan's: "Mama—you ain't heard nothing yet!" (0:42:51). Jack then looks over his mother's shoulder to a pastoral painting hanging on the wall. The picture of young Jakie that his mother gazes upon in the opening scenes of the film is super-imposed on the pastoral painting, indicating a subjective point-of-view shot by means of which the film represents the inner workings of the young man's mind: "Didn't my picture hang there?" Sara Rabinowitz apologetically explains to her son that the picture of him as a young boy "fell and got broke" (0:43:09). The now melancholic Jack asks about his father's well-being, but just as his mother begins to answer, Jack interrupts her to mention his opportunity to sing on Broadway and to tell her that he will sing to her one of the songs he will perform onstage. Jack leads his mother to a chair besides the family's piano and begins to play. The dramatic score that has been accompanying the soundtrack is replaced here by the diegetic sound of lone piano keys. A cut to a medium shot of Jack at the piano frames him so as to allow the audience to see his lips and hands as he dives into a rendition of "Blue Skies." A cut to another medium shot of his mother bobbing her head to the music while clasping her hands indicates the pleasure she receives from listening to her son play

the tune. Toward the end of this private performance, the scene cuts to a shot that captures son and mother in the frame together. He asks her if she likes it and she expresses her approval, to which Jack responds in synchronous dialog: "I'm glad of it. I'd rather please you than anybody I know" (0:45:04). It seems as though the approval of his listening mother supersedes the adoration of countless audiences outside of the Rabinowitz home. For the first time in the film, Jack demands his mother's attention: "Momma, listen. I'm going to sing this like I will if I go onstage, you know, with this show. I'm going to sing it jazzy. Now get this" (0:46:25). According to Thomas Schatz, contemporary audiences were captivated "when vaudeville star Al Jolson spouted his trademark ad-libs to the orchestra, the other players, and even the audience…those snatches of dialogue had as much impact on audiences as the song that followed" (64). As promised, Jack breaks into an up-tempo version of the opening verse, slapping the keys to emphasize the "jazzy" tone. As his mother sits back in her chair with a look of glee on her face, the Cantor, unbeknownst to Sara and Jack, walks through the front door in the background of the shot.

Up to this point in the film, the refusal to listen has functioned on a relatively implicit level; however, in this scene, it is represented explicitly in the dialog of the film. A cut to a close-up of the Cantor reveals his wide-eyed dismay at his son's return and, more disturbingly in the ear of the father, his performance of a jazz tune within the Rabinowitz's household. Such shock quickly turns to disapproval as we hear and see the Cantor yell: "Stop!" (0:46:54). Jack's hands fall from the piano to his lap and his countenance immediately becomes somber. As Michael Rogin points out, *The Jazz*

Singer is structured around a castration of the human voice by the law of the father. The father's "no" severs not only the potentially incestuous relationship between mother and son but also the synchronicity between image and sound:

> In stopping at the same time the music and the romance between son and mother, Cantor Rabinowitz ends speech. For the first and only time in the film there is an extended period of silence, until finally mournful Easter European music—replacing 'Blue Skies'—returns. Jolson's singing will as well, but 'Stop!' is the last spoken word in the film. Mother and son try to placate the father, in gestures and inter-titles, but fail. (Rogin 83)

As Rogin postulates, the father's castrating "no" functions within the context of the Oedipal relationship working on the Rabinowitz family; furthermore, the Cantor's refusal to listen echoes his earlier attempt to suppress his son's desire to sing jazz in the stage hall. As in the opening scene in which the father pulls his teenage child from the stage, his response to finding Jack singing a jazz tune on the family piano serves to suppress his son's desire to be a popular jazz singer.

The way in which the act of listening functions along gender and generational lines is further emphasized in this scene. Sara tries to defend her son, pleading with her husband to understand, but the father refuses to listen to her too. According to the screenplay:

> Sara tries to stop the old man. Jack, surprised at this new attack, tries to defend himself. The old man doesn't want to listen. Finally, Jack, aroused now to the fact that he must fight to get the respect of his father, demands that his father listen to

> him. He grasps his father's hand. The old man stares at him in surprise. He starts to protest and Jack silences him. (Cohn 98)

A title card during this scene in the film represents the drama outlined by the screenplay while also emphasizing the generational conflict at the heart of the narrative: "You're of the old world," Jack tells his father, "If you were born here, you'd feel the same as I do […] Tradition is all right, but this is another day! I'll live my life as I see fit!" (0:48:21). To hear his son talk that way is sacrilegious in the father's mind. Sara continues her attempts to play the role of mediator, reminding her husband that their son has returned home for his birthday. Jack displays a birthday gift for his father and the title card reads: "Many happy returns of the day, 'Cantor Rabinowitz." A shot/reverse shot of Jack and his parents is followed by another shot of their son, which is proceeded by a title card that indicates the role of listening in familial relations: "You see, I remember how we used to say it, when I was a little boy" (0:49:16). As any parent knows, listening plays a crucial role in the developmental process. Jack, here, attempts to appeal to his father by demonstrating his ability to listen to, i.e., remember, the Cantor's teachings. As we can infer from the reaction shot, the gesture has a profound effect on Sara, but the Cantor is nonplussed. The dramatic score that has played on the soundtrack since the father silenced his son at the piano builds to a crescendo as Jack tells his father of his big break on Broadway. The Cantor responds to the news in horror as a title card reads: "A singer in a theatre—you from five generations of Cantors!" (0:50:09). In an attempt to confront his father, rather than simply running away as he does in the beginning of the film, Jack expresses his hopes, which echo the opening title card of the film: "'You taught me to

sing—and you told me that music was the voice of God—and it is just as honorable to sing in the theater as in the synagogue'" (Title 86, Cohn 99). Jack recognizes that which his father denies or, in accordance with the language from the opening title card, misunderstands—i.e., the plaintive cries of the soul whether they call out from within a theater or a synagogue. In case his father is not listening, Jack reiterates his point: "My songs mean as much to *my* audience as yours to *your* congregation!" (0:50:31). Unmoved, his father banishes his son from the house: "I never want to see you again—you *jazz singer*!" (0:50:42). With a look of despair if not defeat, Jack packs his bag to leave, turning to tell his father: "I came home with a heart full of love, but you don't want to understand" (0:51:14). The Cantor refuses to look at his son. Though we can presume he hears Jack, he appears, once again, unable to listen, for, as I have argued, the cinematic representation of the listening subject is often depicted via eyeline matches in which case the lack of an eyeline match may very well represent the inability to listen. In his parting words, Jack admonishes his father, while also acknowledging his mother's ability to listen to her son: "'Some day, Papa, maybe you'll understand things like Mama does" (99). Throughout the film, women serve as listening matrons and young gentiles capable of recognizing Jack's desire for self-expression. After Jack leaves, Sara, with one arm outstretched toward the door, turns to look at her husband. With tears in her eyes, she warns him: "He came back once, Papa, but—he'll never come back again" (0:52:00). The scene cuts to one last shot of the Cantor who provides little indication, other than a slight bow of his head as the shot fades to black, that he listens to his wife anymore than he listens to his son.

On the Day of Atonement, during the penultimate scene of the film, the act of listening functions to reunite, however ephemerally, the jazz singer with his estranged father. Cantor Rabinowitz is on his deathbed and explains to his wife how his heart is breaking because he cannot sing in the synagogue. Furthermore, he relays to his wife a dream he had in which their son "sang Kol Nidre so beautifully." The Cantor goes on to explain to Sara that their son "would be forgiven if he would only sing like that tonight" (1:04:01). The use of the passive voice in this title card begs the question: forgiven by whom? Of course, in the Jewish tradition, the Day of Atonement is when God opens His ears, so to speak, to hear the cries of Jews around the world, which is one interpretation of the Cantor's proclamation: "Kol Nidre is sung on the one evening each year when the skies open and Jews can speak directly to God to ask for forgiveness of sins" (Rogin 85-86). But as far as we know, God did not banish the jazz singer from the Rabinowitz's household. If Jack would only sing like he did in the Cantor's dream, surely his father would forgive him. Thus, the climax to the melodrama is set in motion, catalyzed via the trope of listening. In an attempt to realize the Cantor's dream, Sara and Yudelson, chairman of the committee overseeing the recitation of the Kol Nidre prayer in the synagogue, visit Jack on Broadway during the dress rehearsal of his big show. They plead with him to forgive his father for estranging his son and to return home to sing Kol Nidre in the absence of the father.

The elder men in the film—Cantor Rabinowitz and, at times, Yudelson—are not the only characters plagued by the inability to listen. In the scene backstage during pre-production on Broadway, we learn that, not unlike the events concerning the Day of

Atonement, the Broadway show hinges on Jack's ability to perform. While applying black cork to his face, Jack looks up at a photograph of his mother—suddenly, his countenance has changed. Mary tries to interpret his expression: "I'm afraid you're worrying—about your father" (1:08:58). Looking back at Mary over his right shoulder, Jack reiterates the driving tension at the heart of the film: "I'd love to sing for my people—but I belong here." After a short pause, Jack continues to express the conflict working on his conscience as well as the narrative: "But there's something, after all, in my heart—maybe it's the call of the ages—the cry of my race" (1:09:13). As I discussed above in the context of the opening shots at Coffee Dan's as well as during Cantor Rosenblatt's final performance in Chicago, Jack's ability to listen drives the narrative action as much as his father's inability to do same. With this exchange backstage between Jack and Mary, the film returns to the act of listening to the plaintive cry that resides in every soul, whether it is on Broadway or in the synagogue. Mary tries to discourage the jazz singer from listening to the cries of his race: "I think I understand, Jack—but no matter how strong the call, *this* is your life" (1:09:47). Seeming to be convinced by the gentile lady's claim, Jack, in blackface, looks at his reflection—his other self—in the mirror.[v] Another super-imposition represents the thoughts in Jack's head as the image of the jazz singer in blackface dissolves into the image of his father singing in the synagogue. After the film dissolves back to the image of Jack, he turns to Mary and tries to explain the tension tearing at his soul: "The Day of Atonement is the most solemn of our holy days—and the songs of Israel are tearing at my heart" (1:10:24). Again, Mary discourages Jack from listening to the cry of his race: "Your career is the place God has

put you. Don't forget *that*, Jack" (1:10:43). Mary seemingly convinces Jack that his professional career is the highest priority in his life, more important even than her. The act of listening is deployed here with a degree of irony, as Mary, unwilling to accept Jack's desire to sing in the synagogue, seems to mirror his father's intransigence when it comes to his son's ambition to sing jazz in the stage hall or on Broadway.

Jack's conflicted desires are further highlighted in this scene by the appearance of his mother backstage. Walking into the Broadway dressing room and seeing Jack in blackface, Sara gazes at him in seeming disbelief: "Jakie—this ain't you?" (1:13:06). The jazz singer's mother articulates the theme of identity politics tearing at the seams of Hollywood's first talking-picture—for whom does Jack speak, particularly while in blackface? In Chapter Two, I will discuss the fact that, as Michael Rogin cogently argues, the use of blackface accentuates the lack of representation of African Americans in a Hollywood film about jazz, and moreover, signifies America's trouble with recognizing the voices of ethnic minorities in general. For, while also backstage in Jack's dressing room, Moisha Yudelson articulates the theme of double-consciousness, conjuring W. E. B. Du Bois: "He talks like Jakie—but he looks like his shadow" (1:13:15). For now, though, I am more concerned with investigating the way Jack's mother uses the trope of listening to implore her son to return home to his father. Looking beyond the burnt cork mask that her son dons in preparation for his Broadway show, Sara sits down and explains the situation at home: "Your Papa is so sick—his face so pale—he calls for you" (1:13:35).[vi] In spite of the turmoil between the Cantor and his son that precedes this moment in the film, the audience is left to wonder: will Jack acknowledge his father's

call? The tension between private and public spheres, personal obligation and professional ambition, is accentuated by a crewmember who enters the room: “Better get ready, Jack—it’s your spot next” (1:13:47). Sara continues her plea, employing the trope of listening for greater effect: “In his dreams he hears you singing” (1:13:54). By this point in the narrative, Jack has exhaustively appealed to be heard by his father, which would lead one to expect the son to be swayed by Sara’s rhetoric. Despite such logic, however, Jack tears himself from his mother’s embrace and tells her he cannot return home. Jack is literally leaning away from his mother to emphasize his decision to pursue professional ambition at the expense of familial obligation. As Jack makes final preparations to go onstage for his dress rehearsal, Sara makes a final plea: “Maybe your Papa is dying—maybe he won’t ever hear you sing again” (1:14:45). With Sara pleading in prayer to the heavens as her son walks out to his rehearsal, the melodrama has come to a climax, revolving around the act of listening and the appeal to be heard.

Again, the maternal ear functions as a structuring element in the narrative. The lyrics to the song that Jack performs during his dress rehearsal are important to the overall melodrama working at the heart of the narrative and on the jazz singer’s conscience: “Mother, I’m sorry I wandered away / Breaking your heart as I did / Now that I’m grown up / I’ve come back to say / Things that I felt as a kid” (1:16:05). At this point, the scene cuts from the image of Jack rehearsing onstage to Sara and Yudelson looking on from behind the curtain and listening: “Dear mother of mine / When friends all doubt me / I still have you / Somehow you’re just the same / Mother divine / With your arms around me / I know I’m not to blame” (1:16:42). The scene, which had

returned to images of Jack singing onstage, cuts to a close-up of his mother with tears visible in her eyes. The editing here, working in conjunction with the soundtrack, functions to articulate the role of the maternal ear in the film.

Indeed, the way in which the scene is edited along with the use of the soundtrack accentuates the narrative conflict. The shot of Sara cuts to a close-up of Yudelson, who turns to her and echoes Mary's first comment to Jack back at Coffee Dan's: "Just like his Papa—with the cry in his voice" (1:16:49). The Oedipal complex working on the film is reinforced with Yudelson's comparison here. While reading the title card expressing Yudelson's act of reduced listening, we continue to hear Jack sing: "When skies are sunny / Ain't it funny? / That's when my pals all haunt me" (1:16:55). The scene returns to the close-up of Sara, who, with tear-stained eyes turned upward, acknowledges what Mary had argued moments earlier: "Here he belongs. If God wanted him in His house, He would have kept him there" (1:16:58). Meanwhile, Jack continues to sing over the title card: "When things go wrong / And they don't want me / Mother, I still / Have you. / Mother of mine / When friends all doubt me / I still have you / Somehow you're just the same" (1:17:44). At this point in Jack's performance, Sara acknowledges her loss: "He's not *my* boy anymore—he belongs to the whole world now" (1:17:45). Her son continues to sing over the title cards: ""Mother divine / With your arms about me / I know I'm not to blame." Sara turns from the stage, grabs hold of Yudelson's arm and walks away. Considering her delight in listening to Jack sing "Blue Skies" when he returned home from Chicago, it is not as much what or how Jack sings that distresses her but rather where he sings, or more precisely where he refuses to sing. The cut back to an image of

Jack singing onstage seems to imply that he is aware of his mother's departure, for he wipes his right eye with his hand as if drying a tear: "Gee, ain't it funny / When skies are sunny / That's when my pals / They haunt me / And when things go wrong / And they don't want me / Mother I still have you" (1:18:40). The final lines of Jack's performance that we hear accompanied with the images of his mother's departure are tinged with irony. The use of the word "haunt" points to a sense of lack or emptiness. The significant relationship between the song and the narrative is accentuated when his producer and other members of the audience in attendance for the dress rehearsal, to include Mary and all the other female dancers backstage, praise Jack's performance. As a Broadway hit, his friends surround Jack; but commercial success is fleeting and friends will not always be around. Called to a rehearsal of her own, Mary leaves Jack behind the curtain. The jazz singer returns to his dressing room alone, begins to unmask the burnt cork from his face and cries.

The appeal to be heard both by friends on Broadway and family at home proves to be the primary factor motivating Jack's behavior. Ultimately swayed by his mother's pleading, Jack returns home to see his father one more time. He returns to the bedroom in which his father beat him as a child. Again, the narrative symmetry of structuring the film, in this case, around the setting of the bedroom accentuates the change that has been enacted by this point in the film. In the earlier scene, Jack is a child, reprimanded for singing jazz songs and ultimately driven from his home. In this penultimate scene, he returns a successful man intent on reconciling the relationship with his father. As Jack kneels at his father's side, the Cantor, having been asleep, opens his eyes at the sound of

his son's voice. Jack tries to comfort his father, telling him he will be all right, but the tears on Jack's face belie the truth. His father tells Jack he loves him, which evokes an outpouring of emotion from the jazz singer. The doctor caring for Cantor Rabinowitz enters the room and assures Jack that everything has been done for his father. Of course, Jack knows there is one last thing to do—sing for his father to hear. After Jack exits the bedroom to console his mother in the living room, Yudelson enters the apartment: "I knew you'd come. The choir is waiting" (1:23:57). His mother's eyes open-wide at the prospect of her son reciting the Kol Nidre prayer: "Maybe if you sing—your papa will get well" (1:24:08). Sara's hypothesis demonstrates the way in which the act of listening may function as a potential remedy for the gravest of illnesses.

Mary and Harry Lee (Richard Tucker), the Broadway producer, enter the Rabinowitz's apartment and proceed to highlight the tension prevalent not only in this scene but throughout the entire film: the conflict between being a jazz singer and a cantor. Jack responds to the producers threat that singing in the synagogue will "queer" himself on Broadway and lead to the demise of his professional career: "It's a choice between giving up the biggest chance of my life—and breaking my mother's heart" (1:25:15). Jack's logic expresses the true motivation for reciting the Kol Nidre prayer. For, while his performance as a cantor may provide his father with some sense of relief, it was the threat of severing the relationship with his mother that has driven Jack back home. In defiance of his Broadway producer, Jack says he has no right to do either. He then turns to Yudelson, who implores him again to sing in the synagogue, and informs the family friend that Jack has not recited the Kol Nidre prayer since he was a little boy.

Yudelson replies: “What a little boy learns—he never forgets” (1:26:01). Indeed, when a little boy listens, he never forgets. Yudelson’s words of wisdom depict the relationship between listening and memory. Furthermore, they echo Jack’s claim to his father in an earlier scene when presenting him with a sixtieth birthday present. With all eyes in the room gazing up at Jack, his mother provides one last bit of advice: “Do what is in your heart, Jakie—if you sing and God is not in your voice—your father will know” (1:26:44). His father, the ear of the law (of the ultimate Father), will discern a genuine tear in one’s voice from a manufactured cry.

In the final moments of Cantor Rabinowitz’s life, his son decides to recite the Kol Nidre prayer. Our first indication of the significance behind listening to their son’s performance in the synagogue is represented when Sara helps her husband lift his head from the pillow in order to hear the ceremonial performance. Sara instructs the doctor to open the window, which as we can see from the window across the street adorned with the Star of David will allow the Cantor to listen to his son’s performance. As the volume of the singer reciting the Kol Nidre prayer increases on the soundtrack ever so slightly with the opening of the window, the scene cuts to an image of a cantor performing in the synagogue. A close-up of Jack in ceremonial attire identifies the singer and a cut back to the image of Sara with her dying husband reinforces the effect that listening to their son has on the parents. With a quick shot of Mary and the Broadway producer listening to Jack recite the Kol Nidre prayer, the film seems to suggest that she is able to hear the tear in his voice that she recognized earlier in the film as Jack sang jazz songs at Coffee Dan’s and the tear that Yudelson recognized while listening to the Cantor’s son rehearse on

Broadway. The image track cuts back to Sara and the Cantor on his deathbed: "Mama—we have our son again" (1:29:28). Jack's father slumps back down onto the pillow and passes away. A cut to the images of Jack performing across the street combined with a superimposition of Cantor Rabinowitz functions to represent the trope of listening, indicating the father's death-bed recognition of his son. The Cantor's declaration that he and Sara *have* their son again indicates the complexities of the act of listening, for it reiterates the ways in which listening functions as a means of objectifying or possessing another individual (an aspect of listening that I will explore in greater depth in proceeding chapters). These are the final words the Cantor will speak and would be the final words regarding the act of listening as it functions in *The Jazz Singer* were it not for Jack's final performance on Broadway.

Figure 11

Again in blackface, the jazz singer performs onstage with his mother seated in the audience. As I have suggested, the blackface, as it functions within *The Jazz Singer*, may be read as symbolic of subjugated voices in America and the world at large: "The movie's protagonist who sings in blackface as his antecedents do not, gives birth to a new identity" (Rogin 96). It is from within this context of interracial cooperation, as Rogin continues, that Irving Howe accounts sympathetically for the Jewish attraction to blackface: "'Black became a mask for Jewish expressiveness, with one woe speaking through the voice of another,' [Howe] writes. 'Blacking their faces seems to have enabled the Jewish performers to reach a spontaneity and assertiveness in the declaration of their Jewish selves'" (Rogin 99). Inverting Alain Locke's logic, as with the New Negro,

persecution makes the Jew universal ("The New Negro" 14). Presumably able to recognize her son and his Jewish identity beneath the burnt cork mask, Sara serves as the point-of-audition that has structured the majority of the narrative. For not only is Jack able, in the end, to sing as a jazz singer and as a cantor, his mother is there, both on Broadway and at home, to listen. And as she has throughout the film, Mary (not to mention other anonymous women, such as the one in the background of the shot of Mary backstage on Broadway) is represented as a surrogate maternal listener in the final scenes. Mary and Sara, the two main female characters in the story, function to triangulate the process of listening that revolves around the voice of the jazz singer.

Figure 12 & 13

The narrative that was the initial inspiration for *The Jazz Singer* is also founded on the trope of listening. According to Robert L. Carringer, the original story was inspired by an appearance by Jolson in Champaign, Illinois, on April 25, 1917: "The performance was *Robinson Crusoe, Jr.*, a popular Jolson musical in which he played three roles, including that of Friday" ("Introduction: History of a Popular Culture" 11). Screenwriter Samson Raphaelson, then an undergraduate at the University of Illinois, attended the show, later recalling of the atmosphere:

> I shall never forget the first five minutes of Jolson—his velocity, the amazing fluidity with which he shifted from a tremendous absorption in his audience to a tremendous absorption in his song. I still remember the song, "Where the Black-Eyed Susans

> Grow." When he finished, I turned to the girl beside me, dazed with memories of my childhood on the East Side. "My God, this isn't a jazz singer. This is a cantor!" (qtd. in Carringer)

Raphaelson continues, anticipating in many ways Crosland's insertion of the opening title card to his film:

> This grotesque figure in blackface, kneeling at the end of a runway which projected him into the heart of his audience, flinging out his white-gloved hands, was embracing that audience with a prayer—an evangelical moan—a tortured, imperious call that hurtled through the house like a swift electrical lariat with a twist that swept the audience right to the edge of that runway. The words didn't matter, the melody didn't matter. It was the emotion—the emotion of a cantor. (qtd. in Carringer 11)

This last note regarding listening to Al Jolson exemplifies what Michel Chion, in *Audio—Vision: Sound on Screen*, refers to as "reduced listening" or a mode of listening in which a person recognizes the meaning of sounds that signify not so much the source of the sound or the semantic meaning of said sound but rather the underlying significance of emotion in the singer's voice. It is the mode of listening that Mary and Yudelson use to recognize "the tear" in Jack Robin's voice. While I find Raphaelson's proclamation regarding the content of the song problematic—as I have argued, the content of a song matters greatly as it informs our interpretation of a performance, be it onstage or on screen—I am fascinated by the way in which listening functions to inspire the author who will write the story about the man who would, ten years later, star in the leading cinematic role heard round the world.

The use of the trope of listening in *The Jazz Singer* justifies further exploration of the trope as it functions within other films that utilized the revolutionary technology of synchronous sound recording. More significantly, the under-analyzed—if not under-developed—relationship between the Cantor and Sara Rabinowitz begs further inquiry into the trope of listening as it functions to construct gender relations in early talking-pictures. Take, for example, *Blackmail* (1929), Alfred Hitchcock's first talkie and the first of its kind in British film history, in which the director, with whom Samson Raphaelson will later work on the production of *Suspicion* (1941), employs the act of listening to represent, among other things, the construction of gendered subjectivities. As I will argue, *Blackmail* manages to reduce the female protagonist to an unheard object caught between two male subjects, while simultaneously promoting her to a listening subject with whom filmgoers may identify.

As is the case in *The Jazz Singer*—recall the image of the painter listening to Jakie Rabinowitz in the opening scenes of the film—the act of listening functions to represent an underlying subplot concerning class in *Blackmail*. However, as ethnic identity and generational conflict sublimate any such emphasis on class in Alan Crosland's film, the construction of gender and the traumatized female psyche overshadows the issue of class in Hitchcock's early talkie.

Perhaps more than any director of his era, Hitchcock populated his image tracks with representations of listening subjects. Critics have explored the significance of the birds chirping in Alice White's bedroom the morning after she kills Mr. Crewe, astutely noting how the clever sound effect provides a dramatic intensity absent from the same

scene in the silent version of the film.[vii] Clearly, Hitchcock merits the acclaim he has already received for his inventive use of subjective diegetic sound; however, most scholars concerned with the director's use of sound have neglected the act of listening and the way in which it functions as a structuring element in the narrative. Fewer still have explored the narrative significance of displaced sound during the formative murder scene when Alice stabs Crewe to death after he attempts to rape her. As I will argue below, the movement on the soundtrack from external to internal diegetic sound deserves critical attention as it represents Alice's traumatized psyche and sutures the audience to her perspective via the act of listening, which will come to function as a trope on a variety of levels throughout the narrative.

The first scene in which we meet Alice alienates the audience from her subjective position in the narrative. As she and her boyfriend, Detective Frank, leave police headquarters, "Alice is petulant because Frank has kept her waiting for half an hour, but she perks up when a heavy, mustachioed detective whispers something in her ear. She exits laughing, pointedly excluding Frank from the joke, although he valiantly tries to share in the mirth" (Modleski 16). As Tania Modleski points out, we presume that the mustachioed detective imparts a joke because of Alice's laughter, but we remain, along with her boyfriend Frank, distanced from her point-of-audition. However, in the scene outside Mr. Crewe's apartment, prior to the formative rape scene, Hitchcock clearly sutures the point-of-audition to Alice's subjective position. First, we see a close-up of Tracy, the gentleman who is eavesdropping on Alice and Crewe's conversation and who

Figure 14

will later blackmail Alice and Detective Frank. When Tracy, off-screen, calls Crewe over to speak with him, the camera remains fixed on Alice as Crewe walks off-screen-left. The soundtrack, or more precisely the boom mic, does not follow Crewe and as a consequence filmgoers, like Alice, do not hear what the men have to say to each other. The lack of camera and microphone mobility may be due to the limitations of cumbersome sound-recording equipment; nevertheless, it establishes a subjective point-of-audition, which becomes increasingly pronounced and significant to the narrative as the film progresses.

Figure 15

During the scene in Crewe's apartment, Hitchcock incorporates, directly into the diegesis, the film's musical motif, "Miss Up to Date," which will come to represent Alice. Alone in his apartment with her, Crewe performs a spirited rendition of the song on his piano. Alice comes out from behind a shoji screen and tells him that she cannot button the Harlequin dress into which she has changed for him: "Wait a minute. Where is this trouble?" he asks, standing up to help her. "Never mind," she says, pirouetting and asking him: "How do I look?" "Now wait a minute. It isn't quite right," he says, and with his back to the camera, Crewe approaches Alice who faces us with an innocent look of curiosity. The scene may seem lighthearted, but the tone quickly shifts from a British echo of the melodramatic ditties performed by Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* to a tune clearly related to German Expressionist cinema.

In order to appreciate the trauma working on Alice's psyche after she kills Crewe, we must read his actions in the apartment as rape.[viii] As Robin Wood points out, "Alice

does not murder Crewe. He is attempting to rape her, and she defends herself with the only weapon at hand. It might be claimed [by her neighbor] that she overdoes it (the struggle behind the bed curtains suggests that she stabs him a number of times), but she is clearly overwhelmed by the terror and panic" (259). It is unclear, however, if Wood entirely exonerates Alice since he continues to call *Blackmail* the quintessential "guilty woman" film in Hitchcock's oeuvre. More importantly for my argument, neither he nor Modleski are concerned with the fact that rape is the result of one's refusal to listen. Instructing Alice to place her hands behind her back, Crewe runs his fingers through her hair. As I have argued above, we must consider the audio-visual contract when analyzing the process of listening. The mise-en-scene in this shot establishes the power dynamics of the narrative as Crewe appears above and looks down upon Alice who gazes back at him. Consistent with Chion's theory, the image track informs our interpretation of the soundtrack. Just before the cut, we see Crewe clasp the back of her head. Alice's face writhes in pain as we hear her moan, her voice low at first and then ascending to a high-pitched squeak. These are not the sounds of approval; and by the next cut, it becomes clear that Crewe is forcing himself upon Alice without her consent. Finally, she struggles her way out of his unwelcomed embrace. Wringing her hands, she concludes she better leave and walks back behind the shoji screen to redress. As Alice changes, the soundtrack goes silent. We see Crewe pirouette and stomp his feet, but we hear nothing. Hitchcock will repeatedly silence Crewe throughout this scene, indicating, perhaps, that the soundtrack here represents Alice exclusively.

As the scene continues, Hitchcock metonymically links “Miss Up To Date” to Crewe’s untoward advances. In a medium shot, shadows of bars cross Crewe’s face, marking him and foreshadowing his fate in the narrative. In the same shot, we see Crewe take Alice’s clothes into which she was going to change. Backing away from the shoji screen, he smiles menacingly and returns to the piano for the second rendition of “Miss Up To Date.” As Jack Sullivan notes, Crewe “flails at the tune with quickening tempo, aggressive body motion, and a decidedly less delicate touch” (6). Noticing that her clothes are missing, Alice exclaims, at which point Crewe responds over his shoulder: “I’ve got it.” Alice pleads: “Please, give it to me.” Crew teases: “All right, come around…Come on, get it.” Alice cries again: “Please, please.” Smiling and looking at Alice who, half-dressed, is peeping out from behind the shoji screen, Crewe continues to taunt her: “Come on, Alice.” Then he throws Alice’s clothes (screen-left) across the room: “There it is.” Alice bites her knuckles as Crewe finishes the tune on piano with a disturbingly discordant chord, which the score will echo during the scene after Alice kills the artist. He stands, faces Alice, grabs her by the wrist and drags her across the room, repeating: “Don’t be silly, Alice. Don’t be silly.” The film cuts to a high-angle shot with the camera positioned just inside a window frame in Crewe’s apartment, providing a view as if looking down upon the sidewalk where a policeman walks his beat, seemingly unaware of Alice’s screams: “Don’t! Let me go.” We hear Crewe breathe somewhat exhaustively, and then Alice, again but louder: “Let me go!” In the next medium shot, their shadows cast on a wall depict the ensuing struggle.

Unlike the police officer, we hear Alice scream. Indeed, we must listen to Alice as she struggles to defend herself, lest we be linked to the police officer, not to mention the critics who have misread Crewe's assault as a mere "forcible embrace" or "violent love".[ix] As Alice's hand reaches outstretched from behind the bed curtain for the first time, she screams for the third time: "Let me go." She continues to struggle and scream as the camera tracks in on her hand, which is now reaching for a bread knife on the table next to the bed. A final scream: "No, no," and Alice grabs the knife. We hear the sound of metal-on-metal rattle as Alice bumps the knife against the bread plate, indicating a close/intimate sound perspective. Interestingly, as the shot continues, we hear Alice but not a single sound from Crewe as she stabs him to death. The motion behind the curtain stops, and Crewe's limp arm falls out from behind the bed curtain. After a distinct break here in the image, Alice reappears, slowly retreating from the bed with her back to the camera. Turning to face the camera, Alice looks around the room, shaking from the trauma. By failing to recognize this scene as a rape, critics run the risk of muting the significance of the shift from external diegetic sound to internal diegetic sound in the proceeding scene, and more importantly for my argument, fail to consider fully the role that the act of listening plays in the construction of subjectivity.

Hitchcock associates internal diegetic sound with the traumatized female psyche in the scenes immediately following the killing of Crewe. Just as Alice tenses her shoulders and shudders, a stringed instrumental enters the score representing a rearranged version of "Miss Up to Date." For the first shift from external diegetic sound to internal diegetic sound in British film history, Hitchcock returns, for the third time, to "Miss Up

To Date." The fact that the song has moved from the direct diegesis (Crewe at the piano) to the score is not the only change to the soundtrack. "Miss Up to Date" has been transformed. As Jack Sullivan describes it, the "fake-cheery motif of 'Miss Up to Date' is heard as distant, bleak piano notes that infiltrate the orchestra, becoming a recurring wind tune; originally in a major key, 'Miss Up to Date' darkens into somber diminished chords and anxious whole-tone scales." Notice how Sullivan points to the aural suture in this scene.[x] "The lonely piano sounds originate in Alice's haunted psyche, linking the violence with its warning in the song and its aftermath in her numbed brain as she attempts to dress" (Sullivan 7). "Miss Up To Date," a song suggesting "that modern woman has abandoned old-fashioned morality" (Modleski 21), haunts Alice's mind, the soundtrack and the listening audience.

Displaced sound bookends the scene in which Alice walks the streets all night after having killed Crewe in his apartment, placing the subjective mode of the soundtrack in conflict with that of the image track. The shot when Alice screams out on the street cuts to Crewe's apartment and a shot of his landlady parting the bed curtain and discovering the dead body. The sound of the woman's scream, however, does not cut with the image. Visually, we appear to be back at Crewe's apartment, but acoustically, we remain on the street with Alice.[xi] Akin to the way in which the transference of source music to the score (or the move from external to internal diegetic sound) sutures the audience to Alice's

Figure 16 & 17

psyche, the displaced scream "works to draw us deeply into Alice's subjectivity, to make us identify with her anguish and fear" (Modleski 22).

The act of listening as it concerns gender relations in the film is not limited to Alice alone. After discovering her tenant's dead body, Mr. Crewe's landlady (Hannah Jones) reports the incident to the police by phone. Hitchcock includes the dialog of the phone conversation on the soundtrack, which is significant as the woman has a difficult time communicating with the policeman. After the landlady reports the room number in which she found the dead body, the policeman asks for clarification: "What number did you say, seven or eleven?" The dialog emphasizes the miscommunication, considering the fact that the police dispatch comes nowhere near the number reported by Crewe's landlady: "Thirty-one" she repeats, with heavy accent. "What?" he asks again, still unable to hear her clearly. "Thirty-one, I said." The shot of the landlady on the phone with the police dispatch dissolves to a medium shot of Detective Frank entering the crime scene. Hitchcock humorously alludes to the act of listening here and the trope of miscommunication, but as we already know and will continue to notice, the difficulties concerning the act of listening, particularly as they manifest along gender lines, gravely plagues the narrative.

Figure 18

Following the catalytic scene in Crewe's apartment and Alice's all-night venture on the streets of London, the soundtrack continues to suture the audience to Alice's perspective. The scene during which she enters the phone booth in the front of her parents' store with Frank aligns filmgoers with Alice's point-of-audition, as the

background conversation between her father and the neighbor is muted as soon as Alice closes the door to the booth. Many critics have remarked upon Hitchcock's inventive use of expressionistic sound in the preceding scene:

> [I]n which Alice, having stabbed a man to death just hours before, listens to a chattering neighbor deplore the killer's choice of a knife for the murder weapon; the voice becomes a mumble, with only the often-repeated word "knife" clearly audible; then with the camera fixed on a closeup of Alice, her father's voice comes on the soundtrack asking her to "cut us a bit of bread." As the voluble neighbor drones on, another closeup shows Alice's hand reaching out hesitantly to pick up the utensil, which she sends flying when the word "knife" suddenly screams out at her. (Modleski 18)

As Modleski goes on to note, "[g]enerally, critics of the film content themselves with celebrating the cleverness of such manipulations of sound without discussing its narrative function; they simply admire the way Hitchcock 'so masterfully controls [this element] by turning the cinematic screws'" (18-19). What strikes Modleski as remarkable is that "this first British sound film specifically foregrounds the problems of *woman's* speaking" (19). While I agree that the problems of woman's speaking is crucial to our understanding of Hitchcock's film and a prerequisite to my argument, what I find most remarkable is that Modleski and nearly every other critic neglects to discuss in detail the problem of listening that stems from such problems of woman's speaking in *Blackmail*.

The trouble with listening in Hitchcock's narrative is accentuated by the landlady's testimony to Inspector Walls. Unlike the scene in which she telephones the police to report the killing of her tenant, the officials during her interrogation in the Inspector's office understand quite clearly what the landlady says. Hitchcock's ambivalence toward detectives is reflected via the use of sound and the trope of listening here. As Inspector Walls begins to ask if anything was seen or heard during the night of the killing, the camera pans right-to-left to reveal the landlady who is sitting in the position that the arrested gentleman in the opening scene of the film had previously occupied and which Alice will occupy in the penultimate scene of the film when she attempts to confess to the inspector. As I will discuss in detail below, the lack of diegetic sound prohibits the audience from interpreting what was said and heard during the interrogation of the accused gentleman; however, this scene with the landlady and the scene with Alice in the inspector's office are accompanied by synchronous dialog. Again, Inspector Walls seems perfectly able to understand the landlady despite her accent. Perhaps this scene, in relation to the gross miscommunication represented in the scene when she initially reports the killing over the phone, speaks to complications imposed on the process of listening by technological advances such as the telephone. Unfettered by the hindrance of such modern devices, the communication between Crewe's landlady and the authorities is unobstructed. The landlady informs the police that Tracy had stopped by the apartment on the night of the killing, asking to visit Mr. Crewe. The Inspector listens to the landlady and, in response to her testimony, commences the hunt for Tracy. Picking up the telephone, Inspector Walls asks for police records, and the camera tracks into the

center of the telephone's carbon transmitter or microphone. This image, which is rarely discussed by critics, mirrors the repeated image of the police wagon's wheel. As Wood explains, the rotating wheel, particularly as it is employed at the end of the film, represents the wild-goose chase as the police pursue Tracy, who has falsely been accused of killing Crewe (264).

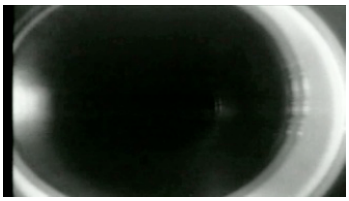

Figure 19

Like the image of the wagon wheel, the image of the carbon transmitter represents the wild goose chase upon which the police embark after interrogating and listening to Crewe's landlady. Quite simply, listening to inadequate information may be just as detrimental as not listening at all. Like the scene in which Alice will try to confess to Inspector Walls, this scene in which the investigator interrogates Crewe's landlady informs our understanding of the opening scene of the film in which a police squad arrests an anonymous individual. Of course, *Blackmail* was originally produced as a silent film and later reshot to accommodate the groundbreaking technology of synchronous sound recording.[xii] As Wood indicates, the decision not to reshoot the opening scenes of *Blackmail* for sound "represses any possible information we might have received as to the man's crime—its nature, motivation, the degree of certainty of his guilt." As Wood goes on to argue, dialog "is withheld, uncertainty maintained, right through to the moment of his incarceration […] with no information as to what crime the man has committed, and only the most minimal evidence that he is guilty of it, we are free to speculate—on the clear evidence the film *does* offer—that his *real* crime is to be

Figure 20

working class and perhaps socialist" (254-255). Depending on whom we identify with during this initial interrogation—the police or the arrested gentleman—we may assume that the accused individual confesses to the alleged crime; however, as Wood notes, his confession would render pointless the lineup in the next scene when the presumed victim identifies the gentleman as the perpetrator of whatever crime was assumed to have taken place.

It may be important to note that Inspector Walls does not immediately assume that Tracy is guilty of killing Crewe. Back in his office, after combing police records and discovering that Tracy has a criminal history, he instructs his subordinate to bring Tracy in for questioning so they can "hear what he has to say" (1:04:00). Inspector Walls appears to be a character who wants to listen to all sides; however, throughout the film, events, such as Tracy dying and a phone call that interrupts Alice when she is trying to confess (which I will discuss in detail below) continue to obstruct his ability to do so.

Back in the Whites' parlor room, Tracy and Frank continue to discuss the matter of blackmail. Frank has just been informed of a phone call for him. Entering the booth, he learns that the police are now searching for Tracy. The point-of-audition in this shot distances the audience from any identification with the detective: for, unlike the previous scene in which the soundtrack followed Frank and Alice into the phone booth, when Frank closes the door to the telephone booth, presumably to remove any chances of the others learning about the news he has just heard, his voice becomes muted. The soundtrack occludes us from hearing what he has to say in response to the caller, placing us in a position more closely aligned with that of Tracy and Alice who, in the following

scene, must figure out what the detective has learned.[xiii] The act of listening here functions as a means of accessing power. With new information gleaned from the phone call from police headquarters, Frank is able to take control of the situation, which Tracy had dominated only moments before. He instructs Alice to lock the door,[xiv] and the image track cuts from a medium shot of Frank to a close-up of Alice's arm as she turns the key to the door. Considering the montage of severed arms in the scene when Alice walks the streets after killing Crewe, it is difficult to ignore the potential significance of this shot. With the information that he has obtained via the telephone call from police headquarters, Frank assumes a position of power not only over Tracy but also over Alice. He holds all the cards, so to speak, and as we will realize, his willingness, or lack thereof, to listen to whom he pleases is one of the ways in which the detective realizes his power.

Whereas the act of listening empowers Frank after the phone call, his unwillingness to listen will signify his oppressive treatment of Alice. As Frank begins to interrogate Tracy in the White's parlor room, Alice interrupts: "I say, Frank" (1:08:09); however, Frank dismisses her and continues his reproach of the blackmailer. The

Figure 21

blocking in this scene is crucial to any interpretation of its narrative significance. Notice that Alice attempts to interrupt the gentlemen only to retreat and resign herself to being marginalized in the foreground of the shot. As Frank and Tracy continue to argue about whom the police would be more likely to listen, the mise-en-scene of the shot indicates to

the audience the subjugation of Alice's perspective in the matter. Tracy reminds Frank that, if the case were to go to a hearing,[xv] he would say that Alice was there, at the scene of the crime, too. Frank reminds Tracy of the multitude of factors contributing to one's ability to be heard: "Ah, you will, will you? Isn't the one thing that you've seemed to have forgotten is that our word's as good as if not better than that of a jailbird?" (1:09:30). Frank's warning to Tracy indicates the relationship between politics and listening. Indeed, the threat of Tracy's voice being suppressed within the context of the judicial system because of his status in society will lead him to flee from the scene and ultimately kill himself by falling through the glass dome of the British Museum of Art.

The scene between Frank, Tracy and Alice in the White's parlor room represents Alice as an object that Frank ignores while also depicting her as a subject who listens. In response to Frank's threat about the police squad coming to arrest Tracy, the blackmailer responds by saying "the surprise at that time won't be for me." As Tracy utters this threat, the camera tilts down to focus on Alice's reaction to hearing the discussion between her boyfriend, the detective, and the blackmailer. The sequence of shots indicates the

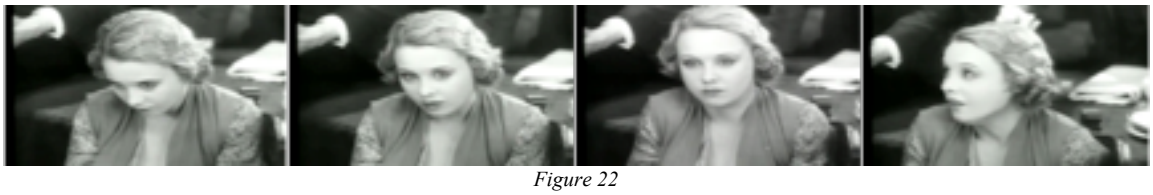

Figure 22

imperative on actors to visualize the act of listening. For in this scene, Alice not only hears the words that Tracy speaks but registers them in relation to her subjective position within the narrative. One more time, Alice interjects, trying to gain her boyfriend's attention: "Frank, you can't do this." (1:10:15). The detective responds: "Why not?" Alice only has time to mutter the words "well because" before Frank admonishes her:

"Now, now, don't interfere Alice. I know what I'm doing" (1:10:27). Still, Alice implores him: "You don't. You don't" (1:10:30) as the camera pans over to Tracy who is listening to the discussion between Alice and Frank with bated breathe. Alice pleads one more time, "Please, Frank," but Frank, the obstinate paternal figure, chides her: "For God's sake, be quiet Alice" (1:10:35). Concerned for his own well-being, Tracy asks Frank directly, what for my argument may very well be the most important question of the film: "Why can't you let her speak?" (1:10:41). Frank tells Tracy to mind his own business, but it is simply a defensive response—for Frank's unwillingness to listen to Alice is very much Tracy's business. Alice's confession would exonerate Tracy, but again, the detective wields the power in this scene: Frank goes on to inform Tracy that Alice will "speak at the right moment" (1:10:46). Indeed, Frank will determine this moment.

Perhaps more than any other scene in the film, that in which Alice attempts to confess to the killing of Crewe in police headquarters represents the inability to listen to the subjected psyche in Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail*. As Alice is escorted down the hallway to Inspector Walls' office, the lack of diegetic sound echoes the opening scene of the film; however, synchronous dialog will return to the soundtrack as soon as she enters his office. Unlike the opening scene in which an unidentified man is arrested, the scene in which Alice attempts to confess to the killing of Crewe is accompanied by sound, allowing us to hear another way in which the institute of law is unable to listen to the oppressed individual. Unbeknownst to Alice and the audience, Frank is already in the office, wrapping up the case against Tracy, who has just died. Inspector Walls instructs Alice to sit down and asks, "You have something to tell us about this case?" (1:21:04).

Alice answers in the affirmative: "You see, I know who did it" (1:21:15). As soon as she has begun to speak, the camera pans right to Frank who is situated in between Alice (screen-left) and Inspector Walls (screen-right). The mise-en-scene complements the drama that is being played out around the trope of listening. Frank will figuratively and literally get in the way of Alice's confession. The detective pleads with his boss: "Is this worthwhile, sir, now that everything's been cleared up?" (1:21:17). But again, Inspector Walls is a figure who attempts to listen to all sides of the case, as far as that is possible, and with a wave of his hand, reminds Frank who wields the power in this discussion: "Yes, let's hear what she has to say" (1:21:19). The camera pans left back to Alice. As Wood notes, the composition of this shot is symmetrical to that of the scene in which the police interrogate the unidentified gentleman at the beginning of the film; however, Wood is quick to point out that symmetry here accentuates difference—not altogether unlike the way in which the symmetrical scenes of Jackie being escorted home by his father and his triumphant return home to New York City as an accomplished musician signifies the jazz singer's dynamic change in character. Unlike the unidentified gentleman (or, for that matter, Crewe's landlady when she is in Inspector Walls's office), Alice is not seated. Perhaps she is simply too nervous to sit down or, perhaps, she is rebelling symbolically against the patriarchal structure that has oppressed her and others before: "What I was going to say is this: I better say what I have to say now. I'd rather not wait" (1:21:24). Alice's words seem to foreshadow the chance event that will prevent her from

Figure 23

Figure 24

confessing to the Chief Inspector, for as soon as she begins to speak, the camera pans right again and focuses on Inspector Walls. Now off-screen, Alice continues: "What I wanted to say is…" but at this moment, the telephone rings. Alice tries to overcome the interruption: "I was the one…" (1:21:35); however, Inspector Walls chooses to listen to the phone call rather than acknowledge what Alice has to say. As was the case with Frank in the phone booth at the White's store, the point-of-audition in this scene does not allow the audience to hear what the call is about. So, we have no way of knowing if the subject of the phone call is in fact more important than a confession concerning the killing of Mr. Crewe. Either way, Walls instructs Frank to "deal with this young lady" as the Inspector will be busy with the phone call "for a minute." Of course, Inspector Walls does not know that Frank has been suppressing Alice's side of the story for the last third of the film; but as dramatic irony would have it, the audience, along with Alice, realizes the consequence of an untimely phone call. Unable to satisfy her desire for self-expression, Alice is swiftly escorted out of the office by Frank. Once the couple is beyond earshot of any police officers, Frank asks her: "What ever made you come here?" (1:22:25). She answers, frankly: "I did it" (1:22:27). The detective responds: "I know" (1:22:46). Frank's admission forces us to recognize his previous attempt to pin the killing on Tracy as a cover-up. He has been aware all along that Alice killed Crewe; however, while he hears Alice's words as an admission to killing Crewe, he is unable to listen to her reason for that killing. As I, and others, have already argued, Alice's reason for killing Crewe determines our understanding of her position within the patriarchal structure in which she is caught. Alice clutches his left hand, which Frank quickly covers with his right hand,

and she implores: “You don’t know. He tried…oh, I can’t tell you. It’s too terrible. I was defending myself. I didn’t know what I was doing. And then…” (1:22:48). As is the case with many of Hitchcock’s films, the ending of *Blackmail* is ambiguous. When Frank simply responds, “My dear,” is he recognizing the rape in this response? If so, does that satisfy Alice’s desire to be heard or would she rather return to Inspector Walls in order to place her confession on the record.

Figure 25

Perhaps we should distinguish Frank’s ambiguity at the end of the film with that of the narrative itself. After she confesses to her boyfriend, a long shot depicts the couple walking down the hallway on their way out of police headquarters. Prior to exiting the building, they are stopped by the heavy, mustachioed detective whom we saw whisper a joke in Alice’s ear in the opening scenes of the film. In our first encounter, the point-of-audition has not yet been aligned with Alice’s subjective position; however, by the end of the film, the point-of-audition is clearly representing Alice’s perspective. Filmgoers hear the sexist joke made by the mustachioed officer when he asks Frank: “Did she tell you who did it? You want to look out or she’ll be losing your job, my boy” (1:23:52). Alice is caught between the two men, left only to listen to the absurdity of their laughter. She attempts to join them in their mirth, but the soundtrack exposes her subjective position:

Figure 26

> The men laugh heartily at the thought of ‘lady detectives’ on the police force, of women usurping male roles and possessing masculine knowledge, and the camera

> tracks in on Alice visually caught between them, trying to force herself to laugh along. Then, as she catches sight of something out of the frame, her expression sobers, and the final shot of the film shows us what she sees: a picture of a laughing, pointing [but obviously silent] jester painted by the murdered artist, which recedes from a close-up view as a detective carries it down the hall. (Modleski 17)

The image of the interpellating jester informs our understanding of how Alice interprets the detectives' laughter. Modleski reminds us that "the woman literally and figuratively occupies precisely that place that Freud assigned to women in the structure of the obscene joke: the place of the object between two male subjects" (17). Yet, when considering the construction of subjectivity in cinema along the lines of listening, the woman becomes the listening subject. In ways, the film "works to reduce Alice to a silent [or more precisely unheard] object between two male subjects" (Modleski 19), but it also promotes her to a listening, albeit humiliated, subject with whom filmgoers can identify.

CHAPTER TWO: LISTENING WITH "A THIRD EAR": THE RECOGNITION OF SUBJUGATED VOICES IN ABOLITIONIST RHETORIC AND AFRICAN AMERICAN DISCOURSE ON CIVIL RIGHTS

"What a happy country this will be, if the whites will listen."

— David Walker, *Appeal*

"Feeling that his rights and his dearest ideals are being trampled upon, that the public conscience is ever more deaf to his righteous appeal, and that all the reactionary forces of prejudice, greed, and revenge are daily gaining new strength and fresh allies, the Negro faces no enviable dilemma."

— W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

"Listen to the above words with a 'third ear' and you will catch echoes of psychological distance"

— Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!*

The failure to listen functions in *The Jazz Singer* not only as a means of engendering conflict along generational lines, which I have discussed above in Chapter One, but also as a way of depicting the subjugation of ethnic identity. As I will argue in this chapter, the suppression of Jack Robin's Jewish roots, coupled with the controversial use of blackface at the end of the film, points to the greater lack of recognition of racial minorities in early Hollywood film—that is, the use of burnt cork highlights all too well the dearth of African Americans in a film about jazz. Moreover, the use of blackface in *The Jazz Singer* begs an investigation of the role listening plays, more generally, in the discourse on race throughout American history.

While Jack Robin risks estranging himself from his family's religious heritage for performing jazz onstage, he also stands the chance of alienating himself from the Broadway community for performing the Kol Nidre prayer in the synagogue. Indeed, Jack's dilemma of replacing his father as a cantor is further complicated by Harry Lee, the Broadway producer, who enters the Rabinowitz's home with Mary during the penultimate scene of the film and warns Jack of the potential fallout were he to sing in the synagogue. "You'll queer yourself on Broadway—you'll never get another job" (1:24:51), his producer warns. Of course, Jack does don the ceremonial garb to recite the Kol Nidre prayer in the synagogue and in the end he does not suffer the consequences on Broadway. Nevertheless, his producer's warning is evidence of a certain pressure on popular artists at the time to suppress their Jewish identity. Perhaps this latent prejudice explains Cantor Rosenblatt's decision, in real life, to decline lucrative offers to perform in Hollywood films. Either way, the price of popular success as a jazz singer at the expense of his religious heritage helps explain, to some extent, Jack Robin's use of blackface in the final scenes of the film, for it signifies metaphorically the repression of one's identity. As Michael Rogin argues, "Blackface is the instrument that transfers identities from immigrant Jew to American," which leads the author of *Black Skin / White Masks* to ask, logically: "Whose sound is it, then, that comes out of the Jewish son's mouth?" (95). To whom do we listen when Jack Robin performs in blackface? After all:

> Jackie finds his voice through black music; Jack will succeed as a blackface singer. The movie insists on the black origins of jazz, but it also wants the music to have Jewish roots, and so represents jazz as the link between Jews and

> America. The texts—original short story, play, movie shooting script, and inter-titles—transfer Jewish sacred music to American jazz. The images put blacks into the picture. (Rogin 95)

As I have argued above, *The Jazz Singer* addresses the issue of building bridges of communication literally across generations and, as I will argue below, metaphorically across ethnic and racial divides.

Prior to his mother's intrusion into his Broadway dressing room, Jack Robin dons the burnt cork mask for the first time in the film. The use of blackface at this point in the film has a wide range of significance, particularly since the filmmakers chose to incorporate a superimposition of Cantor Rabinowitz performing in the synagogue over the mirror's reflection of Jack Robin in blackface. Diegetically, blackface represents the repressed Jewish identity on Broadway—the Jackie Rabinowitz behind Jack Robin—and signifies, non-diegetically, the absent-presence of African Americans in early Hollywood film. Moreover, it speaks to white Americans' historical unwillingness to listen to African American voices, a legacy of failure rooted in the earliest periods of our nation's history, which I will discuss in detail below. In other words, the *explicit* meaning of blackface in *The Jazz Singer* concerns Jack's conflict between singing onstage and in the synagogue; the *implicit* meaning relates to a father who will not listen to his son's desire; while the *symptomatic* meaning[xvi] revolves around the lack of African Americans in a film about jazz.

Figure 27

Psychoanalytic arguments concerning the use of blackface abound. As Ralph Ellison notes in "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," blackface comes "out of the white American's Manichean fascination with the symbolism of blackness and whiteness expressed in such contradictions as the conflict between the white American's Judeo-Christian morality, his democratic political ideals and his daily conduct—indeed in his general anti-tragic approach to existence" (102). As a consequence of this tradition, "the Negro is reduced to a negative sign" (103). Ellison proceeds to outline the relationship between blackface and the identity of the individual donning the mask: "The racial identity of the performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing (the 'thing' in more ways than one), and its function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask" (103). I would like to argue that blackface is the physical embodiment of white Americans' refusal to listen to Jewish Americans' as well as African Americans' appeals to be heard. Diegetically, Jack Robin in blackface signifies the repression of ethnic, Jewish identity on Broadway. Non-diegetically, within the context of American film and literature, blackface represents the oppression of American humanity writ large. As Ellison concludes, "Here the 'darky' act makes brothers of us all. America is a land of masking jokers. We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense, when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals" (109). More importantly, for my argument, such repression—whether it be within the context of *The Jazz Singer* or within the context of

American discourse on race relations throughout U.S. history—stifles the minority voice's appeal to be heard.

For an exhaustive exploration of the history of blackface, I would refer readers to the work of Rogin, Ellison, Eric Lott,[xvii] Robert C. Toll[xviii] and others who have investigated the strange career of the troublesome theatrical mask. I am concerned, here, with the use of blackface in *The Jazz Singer* insomuch as it begs an exploration of the appeal to be heard by African Americans. While I will conclude this chapter with a discussion of Richard Wright's collection of essays entitled *White Man, Listen!*, I will turn first to an analysis of the appeal to be heard as it functions rhetorically in the struggle for emancipation and the subsequent battle for civil rights championed by the likes of David Walker, Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois. For, while the use of blackface within the context of Hollywood and, before that, minstrel theatricals symbolically relates to the act of listening across racial divides, the very real appeal to be heard can be traced through the political discourse on race relations in America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A century before *The Jazz Singer*, David Walker discusses the role of listening in the context of race relations in antebellum America. In *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, Walker employs the act of listening not only as a driving force behind the amelioration of race relations in antebellum America but also as a means of repentance and salvation for those who unjustly oppress others. Over twenty years later, in his *Narrative of a Life*, as well as in his novella "The Heroic Slave," Frederick Douglas incorporates the act of listening for the similar purpose of representing the theme of self-

reformation, which leads to more benevolent relationships between whites and blacks. In all three texts, the recognition of African Americans as human beings rather than brutes stimulates significant action. Sans an acknowledgement of African Americans as humans, those contributing to the oppression of others in Walker's *Appeal* are damned, and race relations in Douglass' autobiography and fiction perhaps doomed. Moreover, self-reformation of the oppressors' understanding of black identity via the process of listening serves as an integral catalyst that moves the texts away from such dreadful conclusions and provides hope for those who wrongfully bind the chains of oppression. As I will argue throughout this chapter, such appeals to be heard serve as an important theme not only in Walker's *Appeal* and Douglass's writing, but also in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright later in the twentieth century.

In nineteenth-century abolitionist discourse, the act of listening functions most often as a means of self-reformation. Many white Americans believed that African Americans were not only inferior to whites but, more consequentially, of a different species altogether. As Sterling Stuckey notes, racist beliefs continued to pervade both northern and southern states during the first-half of the century in which Walker and Douglass wrote their respective texts. Even though many northern states had granted varying degrees of freedom to people of African descent during the early decades of the nineteenth century, "there, too, blacks were considered a breed apart, inferior" (118). Throughout the United States of America, the misrecognition of African Americans—as a species altogether apart from whites—served the ideological function of justifying their oppression.

The identity of African Americans as perceived by their oppressors undoubtedly had many effects on antebellum American culture. In his abolitionist protest pamphlet, Walker investigates the issue of black identity in the recently united states of America. According to Walker, white Americans' association of black Americans with brutishness cuts to the core of race relations in antebellum America: "Of all the assaults on his people, the one that seems to have disturbed Walker most was the charge that they were inferior to whites—were not even members of the human race" (Stuckey 123). While he offers a range of potential solutions to the oppression of his people—the most extreme of which, i.e., violent rebellion, is said to have influenced Nat Turner—Walker continually focuses upon the reformation of white people's understanding of black identity as the most benevolent means of healing the wounds already inflicted upon America. Walker employs a form of moral suasion that Frank M. Kirkland applies to the rhetoric of Frederick Douglass, in which "the appellative qualities of the process of speech or rhetoric, highlighting the requisites of morality, are used to persuade those of opprobrious behavior to change their conduct." Kirkland continues, in "the context of American slavery, it is the abolitionist's use of rhetoric to influence slaveholders and their allies toward a 'change of heart,' whereby they surrender the personal and material advantages and acquire the moral benefits that come with slavery's abolition" (257-258). Hence, it is worth noting that Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* often addresses, quite directly, the white citizens of his country, not unlike American theologian Jonathan Edwards in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In the preamble, Walker defines this white addressee as someone possessing the potential to recognize the erroneous ways

of slavery: "These positions I shall endeavor, by the help of the Lord, to demonstrate in the course of this *Appeal*, to the satisfaction of the most incredulous mind—and may God Almighty, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, open your hearts to understand and believe the truth" (3-4). As early as the second paragraph of the preamble, Walker begins to describe this character as skeptical and in opposition to Walker's argument. In 1830, the most incredulous mind believed to oppose a protest pamphlet written by an African American would most likely have been an advocate of racist oppression.

At this point in the pamphlet, Walker clarifies to whom the narrative aims its attention by distinguishing between an oppressor with the potential for reformation (i.e., those capable of listening) and one for whom it is too late. Discussing the many abhorrent consequences of slavery, Walker outlines six characteristics that he demands his audience possess:

> All persons who are [one] acquainted with history, and particularly the Bible, who are [two] not blinded by the God of this world, and are [three] not actuated solely by avarice—who are [four] able to lay aside prejudice long enough to view candidly and impartially, things as they were, are and probably will be—who are [five] willing to admit that God made man to serve Him alone, and that man should have no other Lord or Lords but Himself—that God Almighty is the sole proprietor or master of the WHOLE human family, and will not on any consideration admit of a colleague, being unwilling to divide his glory with another—and who can [six] dispense with prejudice long enough to admit that we

> are men…I say, all who are permitted to see and believe these things, can easily recognize the judgments of God among the Spaniards. (7)

Walker's text addresses any character that believes in God and can consider the oppressed as humans instead of brutes. By appealing to a category of human beings such as the one outlined above—a group of individuals who can recognize the erroneous ways of oppression in foreign lands such as Spain or Great Britain—Walker implies a potential for self-reformation. He understands that inevitably some people will be deaf to his plea and, therefore, refines his depiction of the type of character to whom the narrative speaks by including a code of ethics required to reform one's opinion of black identity: "Though others may lay the cause of the fierceness with which [the Spaniards] cut each other's throats, to some other circumstance, yet they who believe that God is a God of justice, will believe that SLAVERY is the principal cause" (7). Walker does not concern his text with every individual who bolsters the institute of slavery or its perpetuation because he believes that some of them lack the potential to reform their opinions of African Americans. Instead, Walker rhetorically constructs his audience in order to allow for a complex and even more plausible consideration of self-reformation and its subsequent consequences. By setting aside prejudice long enough to reconsider black identity, the potential recipient of Walker's message is more likely to possess the ability to listen and therefore would be more likely to realize the injustice of slavery.

Walker continues to appeal to a sense of morality that depends on the recognition of African Americans as human beings in order to persuade his audience to listen. If God

is a God of justice to all his creatures, Walker asks, could such a deity allow tyrants to live in peace while others remain subjected to the horrors of oppression. Walker argues that such a God would not be just in the opinion of the oppressed: "I ask every man who has a heart, and is blessed with the privilege of believing—Is not God a God of justice to all his creatures?" (7). Again, Walker realizes that such a message will not produce the desired effect in every white person, since some of their "cups are too full," as he so often phrases it. Some people are beyond reform, i.e., some people will not listen, but we must remember the passage quoted above in which Walker describes the white character at whom he aims his plea for self-repentance. By reminding his intended audience of God's justice, Walker has begun his argument regarding the moral implications surrounding the reformation of white people's understanding of black identity: "If you will allow that we are MEN, who feel for each other, does not the blood of our fathers and of us their children, cry aloud to the Lord of Sabaoth against you, for the cruelties and murders with which you have, and do continue to afflict us?" (8). Throughout his *Appeal*, Walker represents a character in whom he can establish the fear of God. Since God must avenge the oppression of one of "his creatures," such a fear is logically predicated upon the understanding that African Americans are human beings and, of course, upon the assumption that God not only exists but also listens to His children's cries.[xix]

In Article IV of the *Appeal*, Walker elucidates the social benefits that would result from the fair and equal treatment of all people, which according to his rhetorical appeal depends on the act of listening. Again addressing the oppressors directly, Walker speculates upon the benevolent consequences of their reformation, declaring that such a

change of mind, if they are willing to listen, will lead to the appeasement of race relations in America. While concluding his argument against the Colonization plan, which even many prominent abolitionists of his time heavily supported, Walker expounds upon the social significance of considering him, and all those who remain oppressed, as members of the human race:

> Americans! Notwithstanding you have and do continue to treat us more cruel [sic] than any heathen nation ever did a people it had subjected to the same condition that you have us. Now let us reason—I mean you of the United States, whom I believe God designs to save from destruction, if you will hear. For I declare to you, whether you believe it or not, that there are some on the continent of America, who will never be able to repent. God will surely destroy them, to show you his disapprobation of the murders they and you have inflicted upon us. (72)

Once again, Walker predicates his argument on the understanding that some people will be unable to reform their opinion of black people and finds it futile to attempt to persuade them to do so. Instead, he continues to concentrate on the oppressor who has the ability to reconsider African American identity:

> Throw away your fears and prejudices then, and enlighten us and treat us like men, and we will like you more than we do now hate you, and tell us no more about colonization, for America is as much our country, as it is yours—Treat us like men, and there is no danger but we will all live in peace and happiness

> together. For we are not like you, hard hearted, unmerciful, and unforgiving. What a happy country this will be, if the whites will listen. (73)

Self-reformation, according to Walker's logic, functions as a necessary catalyst for emancipation, which will lead not only to personal emancipation for the oppressed and spiritual salvation for the oppressor but also to greater social harmony. As Stuckey has pointed out, for Walker the relationship between people of color and their oppressor will begin to heal only with the sincere reformation of the latter's opinion of the former (130-131). Despite the repeated indications of doom for many white Americans, Walker's *Appeal* still retains hope for the reconciliation of race relations in the United States but only through the reformation of white America's ability to listen and recognize the humanity or, as Du Bois would say, the souls of black folk.

Despite the vehemence exhibited toward whites who will not reform their notion of black identity, Walker sincerely wants to help as many people as possible regardless of race. "The burden of the *Appeal* is essentially one of doom for whites," as Stuckey notes. "Yet the fact that Walker gave attention to the possibility of harmonious relations between whites and blacks must be taken seriously because the search for freedom and the readiness to consider changing realities in the interest of that search were both important to him" (131). Furthermore, as Peter P. Hinks points out in his introduction to the *Appeal*, Walker ceaselessly worked toward ameliorating race relations in the United States: "Despite America's horrible sins, Walker proclaimed, the nation was fully redeemable, and he refused to abandon it" (xxxi). Despite the understanding that some

whites were beyond repentance, which explains the vehement tone hurled at them throughout much of his *Appeal*, Walker refuses to abandon his belief in social harmony and understands the reformation of black identity in the minds of their oppressors to be the means toward such ends. More importantly, for my argument, such a reformation is engendered, in large part, by the ability to listen across racially constructed social boundaries.

David Walker makes explicit in his *Appeal* the argument, which up to this point has remained implicit in my thesis, that *listening* functions as a metaphor for *reading*. As Marcy J. Dinius points out, Walker quite consciously designed his text to be heard: "The type in Walker's *Appeal* makes the author's outrage not just visible but also audible—readers can virtually hear his rising voice and anger in his text's italics, capitalized words, and multiple exclamation points" (56). In order to appeal to the widest audience possible, to include the illiterate, "[t]he language of Walker's *Appeal* and the visual form that this language takes combine to enable readers and auditors to internalize Walker's voice, his argument, and his emotions with the proper inflection." As Dinius goes on to argue, in his use of typography "Walker sought to collapse ostensible binaries of voice and print so that his pamphlet would broadcast his message as widely as possible, converting print and literacy from means of control into instruments for advancing the freedom and equality of the enslaved and free-black populations of the United States" (57). More importantly, for my argument, the appeal to be heard signified by Walker's loud typography echoes his rhetorical appeal to white, slaveholding Christians. Considering his admonition of significant segments of the white population—or the American

establishment—for failing to listen, perhaps it should come as no surprise that his typography has been overlooked even though his pamphlet, after over a century in relative obscurity, has been recognized as part of the American literary canon. According to Dinius, "in book history and print culture scholarship, African American texts have received little attention, despite their increasing presence in the expanded literary canon" (57). As will be the case with Richard Wright, Walker's representation of the act of listening within the diegesis of his text points to problems of recognition within the context of literary and cultural studies. Indeed, there is a long history when it comes to the recognition of minority voices, or the lack thereof, in academic circles. The twentieth century saw an unprecedented expansion of the American canon, which is why I find it high time to examine the way in which the politics surrounding listening have functioned within that history—for as I will argue below, listening comes to function as a metaphor for recognizing the marginalized voice. But first, let me return to the trope of listening within the context of American abolitionist discourse, particularly within the work of David Walker's great predecessor and fellow abolitionist, Frederick Douglass.

Walker's appeal to rebuild relationships between the races and his deployment of the act of listening for rhetorical purposes establishes a common theme connecting his protest pamphlet with the work of Frederick Douglass. Writing not only within the context of abolitionist discourse but also within the realm of American fiction, Douglass employs the act of listening for more wide-ranging narrative purposes than David Walker. While Walker uses the trope as a means of addressing the white man's unwillingness to recognize African Americans as human beings and as a catalyst for

change in race relations, Douglass uses the act of listening for the additional purposes of representing a means by which the oppressor instills fear, intimidation and gloom in the mind of the oppressed; as a means of constructing subjectivity (of the slave and slaveholder alike); engendering desire; representing confusion and/or chaos in an increasingly industrial society; deconstructing institutional state apparatuses (e.g., the law); conforming to or rebelling against social hierarchies; and, but not limited to, displaying a representative quality of the author.

As Emerson declares, in his essay "The Poet," listening is a necessary quality of the author:

> We know that the secret of the world is profound, but who or what shall be our interpreter, we know not. A mountain ramble, a new style of face, a new person, may put the key into our hands. Of course the value of genius to us is in the veracity of its report. Talent may frolic and juggle; genius realizes and adds. Mankind in good earnest have availed so far in understanding themselves and their work, that the foremost watchman on the peak announces his news. It is the truest word ever spoken, and the phrase will be the fittest, most musical, and the unerring voice of the world for that time. (11)

Throughout his narrative, Douglass demonstrates an ability to listen to his surroundings, particularly the cries of his fellow slaves, to interpret their wails, and to inspire others to listen. Describing a barn in which two slaves were charged with caring for the horses on the plantation, Douglass expresses an ability to empathize via the act of listening: "It was

painful to stand near the stable door, and hear the various complaints against the keepers when a horse was taken out for use" (402). Of course, one would expect empathy from Douglass here; what intrigues me is the author's use of listening to manifest such an ability to understand and share the feelings of his fellow slave. The author repeatedly describes the brutality he not only saw but also heard while a slave. Recalling the abuses of his first master, Anthony, Douglass again employs the act of listening:

> I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heartrending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from this gory victim seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush. (397)

This passage speaks to the slaveholder's unwillingness to listen to the cries of pain emitted by the beaten slave. By no means am I implying that Mr. Anthony does not hear the cries, for he wants to hear them in order to know that his whip is indeed torturing Douglass's aunt, but listening is very much a selective act. We witness, in this passage, the subjectivity of listening: as a slaveholder, Mr. Anthony interprets what he hears as proof of his power, while as a fellow slave and nephew of the woman being tortured, Douglass interprets what he hears as evidence of slavery's brutality. Indeed, listening depends very much on one's perspective.

Douglass's ability to listen empowers him to learn of the underpinnings by which the system of slavery depends. "Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C," he writes, "Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once, forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read" (409). As any teacher can attest, the act of listening plays a fundamental role in the process of education. Wu Jin-Ping notes the way in which listening to Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Aulds functions in the maturation of the young slave: "This dialogue gave Douglass unexpected knowledge. Later he recalled that Master Hugh's 'discourse was the first decidedly anti-slavery lecture to which it had been my lot to listen'" (30). So perhaps we should not be surprised when Douglass reflects, in his narrative, on the significance of what he heard: "These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought" (409-410). In fact, listening engendered Douglass's original motivation to flee the plantation for the city in which he would encounter the Aulds. The author's desire to experience life in Baltimore stems from his keen ability to listen: "Cousin Tom, though not fluent in speech, had inspired me with that desire by his eloquent description of the place. I could never point out any thing at the Great House, no matter how beautiful or powerful, but that he had seen something at Baltimore far exceeding, both in beauty and strength, the object which I pointed out to him" (407-408). The ability to listen motivates many events in Douglass's autobiography, but I am getting ahead of myself. Suffice it to say, for now,

that Douglass possessed the ability to listen, a prerequisite of Emerson's representative man.

Like the successful author, an effective abolitionist must possess the ability to capture the attention of others; i.e., he or she must persuade the audience to listen, metaphorically if not always literally.[xx] While preparing to flee from a life of slavery, Douglass was able to capture the ear of his brethren: "I was not willing to cherish this determination [to escape] alone. My fellow-slaves were dear to me. I was anxious to have them participate with me in this, my life-giving determination. I therefore, with great prudence, commenced early to ascertain their views and feelings in regard to their condition, and to imbue their minds with thoughts of freedom" (432). Again, Douglass's ability to listen is complimented by his ability to have others listen to him: "I bent myself to devising ways and means for our escape, and meanwhile strove, on all fitting occasions, to impress them with the gross fraud and inhumanity of slavery" (432). Like Walker, who appealed to his brethren for similar purposes, Douglass espouses the tenets of classic philosophy concerning rhetoric[xxi] and implores his fellow slaves to listen so they may recognize the ways in which slavery steals the humanity from those in bondage. He discovered a willing audience: "I went first to Henry, next to John, then to the others. I found, in them all, warm hearts and noble spirits. They were ready to hear" (432). The phrase "ready to hear" suggests that others, or even Henry and John themselves at another point in time, would be incapable of heeding Douglass's words, just as many of Walker's contemporary citizens' "cups were too full" to hear his appeal.

In addition to appealing successfully to fellow slaves, Douglass, upon gaining his freedom, also captivated the ear of abolitionists and much of the nation. Recalling his initial foray into the abolitionist movement, Douglass alludes to the listening subjects who encouraged him to advocate their cause:

> I seldom had much to say at the meetings, because what I wanted to say was said so much better by others. But, while attending an anti-slavery convention at Nantucket, on the 11th of August, 1841, I felt strongly moved to speak, and at the same time much urged to do so by Mr. William C. Coffin, a gentleman who had heard me speak in the colored people's meeting at New Bedford. It was a severe cross, and I took it up reluctantly. The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighted me down. I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease. From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren—with what success, and with what devotion, I leave those acquainted with my labors to decide. (447-448)

Displaying more than modesty, Douglass's words highlight the importance, rhetorically, of possessing the ear of the listener. As Frank M. Kirkland notes, "[m]oral suasion has been widely recognized as a significant feature in the intellectual and political life of Frederick Douglass" (243). Kirkland goes on to discuss the way in which listening to the abolitionist engenders action: "That is to say, moral suasion requires the belief that it can awaken through rhetoric moral sensibility and, as a consequence, motivate us to do what

is good" (244). Indeed, the success of the abolitionist's oratory depends, in more ways than one, on the listening subject.

One such person acquainted with the labor of Frederick Douglass—and more importantly for my argument the free-slave-turned-abolitionist's extraordinary degree of success in persuading his audience—is William Lloyd Garrison. According to the founder of the abolitionist publication *The Liberator*, Douglass "came to the platform with a hesitancy and embarrassment, necessarily the attendants of a sensitive mind in such a novel position." But, Garrison continues, after "apologizing for his ignorance, and reminding the audience that slavery was a poor school for the human intellect and heart, [Douglass] proceeded to narrate some of the facts in his own history as a slave, and in the course of his speech gave utterance to many noble thoughts and thrilling reflections." At this point in his testimony, Garrison alludes to the way in which listening can function as a means of inspiration: "As soon as he had taken his seat, filled with hope and admiration, I rose, and declared that Patrick Henry, of revolutionary fame, never made a speech more eloquent in the cause of liberty, than the one we had just heard" (388-389). Garrison's recollection of Douglass's first speech in Nantucket speaks to the ways in which listening may engender a sense of inspiration and hope. As he continues to recount his reaction (and the crowd's response) to Douglass's speech, Garrison speculates upon the abolitionist's potential to penetrate the ears of even the slaveholders themselves:

> I reminded the audience of the peril which surrounded this self-emancipated young man at the North—even in Massachusetts, on the soil of the Pilgrim

> Fathers, among the descendants of revolutionary sires; and I appealed to them, whether they would ever allow him to be carried back into slavery,—law or no law, constitution or no constitution. The response was unanimous and in thunder-tones—'No!' 'Will you succor and protect him as a brother-man—a resident of the old Bay State.' 'YES!' shouted the whole mass, with an energy so startling, that the ruthless tyrants south of Mason and Dixon's line might almost have heard the mighty burst of feeling, and recognized it as the pledge of an invisible determination, on the part of those who gave it, never to betray him that wanders, but to hide the outcast, and firmly to abide the consequences. (389)

Here, the act of listening, within the abolitionist movement writ large, functions as a means of recognition not only of the humanity of slaves but also the movement committed to fighting for their emancipation. Of course, Douglass, like Walker two decades before, will remain skeptical of the slaveholder's ability and willingness to listen.

Indeed, the inability or unwillingness—of the master as well as the slave—to listen has grave consequences in Douglass's *Narrative*. Describing the daily procedures of slave life, the author depicts the early hour at which the slaves were summoned from their slumber to the field by the driver's horn: "At the sound of this, all must rise, and be off to the field. There must be no halting; every one must be at his or her post; and woe betides them who hear not this morning summons to the field; for if they are not awakened by the sense of hearing, they are by the sense of feeling: no age nor sex finds any favor." As he will in other parts of his autobiography, Douglass details the

consequences of the slave not listening: “Mr. Sever, the overseer, used to stand by the door of the quarter, armed with a large hickory stick and heavy cowskin, ready to whip any one who was so unfortunate as not to hear, or, from any other cause, was prevented from being ready to start for the field at the sound of the horn” (399). The inability to hear and hence heed can have dire consequences for the slave, as Douglass explains later in the narrative. The cousin of Douglass’s wife was deemed responsible for the care of the master’s baby; “during the night she fell asleep, and the baby cried. She, having lost her rest for several nights previous, did not hear the crying” (406). The result of this unfortunate failure to listen cannot be underestimated, for when the master’s wife—and mother of the child—found the girl “slow to move,” she proceeded to mangle Douglass’s kin “in the most horrible manner, breaking her nose and breastbone with a stick, so that the poor girl expired in a few hours afterward” (406). The act of listening, or more precisely the failure to listen, functions as motivation for some of the most heinous punishments in Douglass’s narrative.

The author repeatedly registers the horrors of slave life via the act of listening. He writes about his “conviction of the infernal character of slavery” and his “unutterable loathing of slaveholders” that is deepened by “their base ingratitude to my poor old grandmother” (416). To represent his grandmother’s despair late in her life, Douglass deploys the soundscape: “The hearth is desolate. The children, the unconscious children, who once sang and danced in her presence, are gone. She gropes her way, in the darkness of age, for a drink of water. Instead of the voices of her children she hears by day the moans of the dove, and by night the screams of the hideous owl: All is gloom” (417). The

loneliness engendered by the slave system, which ruthlessly separated parents from their children, is registered in the passage by what the grandmother does not hear. Her estrangement from her offspring renders the sound of a dove as a moan and the hoot of an owl as a hideous scream. In this section of his narrative, we witness the ways in which Douglass uses the act of listening to present the perspective and develop the character of the slave, just as he will use the trope to represent those of the master.

In order to appreciate the extraordinary occasions in Douglass's narrative during which a white man listens to the slave, we must make note of the slave master's habitual refusal or inability to listen. As Garrison notes in his introduction to Douglass's autobiography, written in May of 1845:

> So profoundly ignorant of the nature of slavery are many persons, that they are stubbornly incredulous whenever they read or listen to any recital of the cruelties which are daily inflicted on its victims […] Tell them of the cruel scourgings, of mutilations and brandings, of scenes of pollution and blood, of the banishment of all light and knowledge, and they affect to be greatly indignant of such enormous exaggerations, such wholesale misstatements, such abominable libels on the character of the southern planters! (391-392)

Garrison's impassioned account of the white man's unwillingness to listen to Douglass's abolitionist speeches in antebellum American society echoes the refusal of white characters to listen within the diegesis of his *Narrative*. As previously noted, the slave master administering the whipping of the author's aunt refused to recognize her cries of

humanity and instead interprets them as assurances of a job well executed. When describing another slave master, Douglass reiterates the white man's characteristic refusal to listen: "[Mr. Austin Gore] was cruel enough to inflict the severest punishment, artful enough to descend to the lowest trickery, and obdurate enough to be insensible to the voice of a reproving conscience" (404). In many ways, listening functions at the crux of slave culture, for as I have argued above, the ideology underpinning it very much depends on those to whom one does or does not listen. The likes of Mr. Gore, Master Anthony and Colonel Lloyd must remain imperturbable to the appeals of slaves and abolitionists lest their minds change and the ideology upholding their way of life crumble.

Douglass's emphasis on these characters who do not or cannot listen functions to accentuate those characters that can recognize the slave. A formative moment in Douglass's *Narrative*, in which an overseer goes from relegating him to a subhuman status to recognizing him as a fellow human being, depends, in large part, on the act of listening. When seeking refuge from a job due to sickness, Douglass is beaten by Mr. Covey, after which Douglass "resolved, for the first time, to go to [his] master, enter a complaint, and ask his protection" (425). In order to do so, Douglass must first flee the oppressive watch of Mr. Covey: "I succeeded in getting a considerable distance on my way to the woods, when Covey discovered me, and called after me to come back, threatening what he would do if I did not come. I disregarded both his calls and his threats" (425). In this passage, the refusal to listen represents a means of rebelling.

Like the slave who consciously decides not to heed the slave driver's morning summons to the field, Douglass's refusal to listen represents the assertion of his agency, for better or worse. More importantly for my argument, the author concludes this episode by employing the act of listening as a catalyst for change. Having successfully escaped the grips of Mr. Covey and having arrived at his master Thomas's store, Douglass makes an appeal to be heard despite the great odds of his words falling on deaf ears—the kind of which Garrison mentions in his introduction to the *Narrative*. Nevertheless, Douglass tells Master Thomas "all the circumstances as well as I could, and it seemed" as Douglass recalls, "at times to affect him" (425-426). Unfortunately, for Douglass, Master Thomas was in the end not willing to listen to the slave's appeal:

> Master Thomas ridiculed the idea that there was any danger of Mr. Covey's killing me, and said that he knew Mr. Covey; that he was a good man, and that he could not think of taking me from him; that should he do so, he would lose the whole year's wages; that I belonged to Mr. Covey for one year, and that I must go back to him, come what might; and that I must not trouble him with any more stories, or that he would himself *get hold of me*. (426)

Eventually, Master Thomas sends Douglas back to Baltimore to live again with the slave owner's brother, Hugh. While in Baltimore, Douglass learns the trade of ship-building: "In entering the shipyard, my orders from Mr. Gardner were, to do whatever the carpenters commanded me to do. This was placing me at the beck and call of about seventy-five men. I was to regard all these as master. Their word was to be my law. My

situation was a most trying one" (437). Douglass's recollection of his experience in the shipyard hints at the role of listening in the workplace. It also depicts the difficulties of listening within a cacophonous soundscape. He recounts how "[t]hree or four voices would strike [his] ear at the same moment […] (Three voices at the same time.) 'Come here!—Go there!—Hold on where you are! Damn, you, if you move, I'll knock your brains out!'" (437). Such a confusing environment was not conducive to learning the trade, and after eight months, Douglass got into a fight with four of the white apprentices. Afterward, Douglass talks to master Hugh, who unlike his brother, Thomas, "listened attentively to my narrative of the circumstances leading to the savage outrage, and gave me many proofs of his strong indignation of it" (438). The contrast between Master Hugh's willingness to listen and his brother's inability to do so is not lost on the slave: "I am happy to say of him, irreligious as he was, his conduct was heavenly, compared with that of his brother Thomas under similar circumstances" (438). Mr. Hugh was "very much enraged;" however, he could do little about the matter. As Douglass explains, Mr. Hugh "could issue no warrant on my word. If I had been killed in the presence of a thousand colored people, their testimony combined would have been insufficient to have arrested one of the murderers" (439). This incident speaks to the institution of law and its refusal to listen to victims of society. It is reminiscent of the argument I made (above in Chapter One) concerning the police department's refusal to listen to a rape victim in Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail*, and it anticipates my argument (below in Chapter Three) concerning Bigger Thomas's appeal to be heard in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Suffice it to say that societal change occurs incrementally. The institutional discrimination

exhibited by the legal system in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* will only change after enough individuals have reformed their way of thinking. We witness the seeds of such transformations in this isolated anecdote about Master Hugh, yet the revolution of the white man's recognition of the slave and the former's ability to listen to the latter is demonstrated more dramatically in Douglass's fiction.

Douglass certainly knew of David Walker's text, which quite possibly influenced his writing. According to Peter P. Hinks, "Douglass readily recalled as late as 1883 that the *Appeal* 'startled the land like a trumpet of coming judgment' and that David Walker 'was before either Mr. Garrison or Mr. [Benjamin] Lundy'—two of the most eminent white abolitionists, both held dear by Douglass—in inspiring the abolitionist movement and the defense of black freedom and rights" (xlii). Like Walker, Douglass depicts the process of self-reformation engendered via the act of listening as a catalyst for the amelioration of race relations in his text. However, unlike the abolitionist from Boston, who writes in the form of a protest pamphlet, Douglass chooses a narrative format in "The Heroic Slave" to address the issue of black identity as perceived by whites in antebellum America. The novella format enables the author to create a more concrete listening-subject in whom to enact the narrative device of self-reformation. Whereas Walker's text implies the existence of a character that will receive his message, Douglass creates the character of Mr. Listwell, a free white man from Ohio, to actually embody the self-reformation upon which Walker speculates. The story may very well have been inspired by a book that Douglass secured while living with the Aulds, for in *The Columbian Orator*, Douglass "read a dialogue between a runaway slave and his master in

which the slave's answer to his master's question why he wanted to run away touched the master, who then emancipated the slave and wished him well" (31-32). While not a slave owner per se, Mr. Listwell does undergo a reformation similar to that of the master in *The Columbian Orator*, which according to Jin-Ping, enhanced Douglass's "burgeoning awareness of the power of spoken and written words to foment progressive change and ultimately influenced his decision to become an orator" (32). As I argue, Douglass repeatedly employs the trope of listening—not only in his sole work of fiction, "The Heroic Slave," which Jin-Ping discusses, but also in his non-fiction, which I discuss above—to represent the means by which such a progressive change may be fomented.

Upon overhearing a slave's soliloquy in the woods while traveling through Virginia, Mr. Listwell experiences the type of change in character that Walker imagines in his pamphlet and that Douglass reads about in *The Columbian Orator*. While comparing his situation with the lot of other animals in the world, Madison Washington, the eponymous heroic slave on the run, pleads on behalf of his own humanity:

> That accursed and crawling snake, that miserable reptile, that has just glided into its slimy home, is freer and better off than I. He escaped my blow, and is safe. But here am I, a man,—yes, a man!—with thoughts and wishes, with powers and faculties as far as angel's flight above that hated reptile—yet he is my superior, and scorns to own me as his master, or to stop to take my blows. (177)

For Douglass, black identity in the eyes of whites during antebellum America is inferior even to that of an animal. The repetition of and exclamation placed upon the notion that

Madison is in fact a human indicates the importance of such a fact. Madison vows to cease living "under the constant dread and apprehension of being sold and transferred, like a mere brute" (178). As in Walker's *Appeal*, the enslavement of an individual in Douglass's text occludes his or her humanity or sense-of-self. Emancipation remains wed with identity politics, and Mr. Listwell, who unbeknownst to Madison is overhearing the apparent soliloquy, must recognize this relationship in order to help the slave. Ultimately, Madison's declaration that he is a human being and not a brute will cause Mr. Listwell to change his view of an historically oppressed people.

Eavesdropping upon Madison's speech in the woods proves to be providential for Mr. Listwell. As section one of the story closes, the free white man contemplates the revelation he has just overheard: "The speech of Madison rung through the chambers of his soul, and vibrated through his entire frame. 'Here is indeed a man,' thought he, 'of rare endowments,—a child of God,—guilty of no crime but the color of his skin,—hiding away from the face of humanity, and pouring out his thoughts and feelings, his hopes and resolutions to the lonely woods'" (181). Considering the poetic care with which Douglass crafts his text, and, more importantly, the significance which the author, not unlike Walker, places on the recognition of black identity as no less than human, the break in Mr. Listwell's speech isolating the phrase "Here is indeed a man" serves to emphasize the importance of such a revelation. As if in response to Walker's plea, Mr. Listwell, as a result of this chance occasion, suddenly recognizes Madison as a child of God and, thus, reforms his consideration of black identity. Listening to the slave's speech changes the way Mr. Listwell thinks of Madison, and such reformation ultimately leads to action:

"From this hour I am an abolitionist. I have seen enough and heard enough, and I shall go to my home in Ohio resolved to atone for my past indifference to this ill-starred race, by making such exertions as I shall be able to do, for the speedy emancipation of every slave in the land" (182). Indifference too often perpetuates oppression, and Mr. Listwell, while not part of the solution, would have continued to be a part of the problem if not for the reformation of his attitude toward the oppressed Madison Washingtons of the world. Mr. Listwell's newfound understanding of black identity causes him to aid in the eventual emancipation of his brethren, providing the runaway slave food and shelter for a night in Ohio.

As with Walker's *Appeal*, the action engendered by such self-reformation in "The Heroic Slave" ultimately improves race relations. After successfully escaping to Canada, Madison writes a letter to Mr. Listwell in which he addresses the reformed character as "My dear Friend,—for such you truly are" (205). Madison writes the letter in order to thank Mr. Listwell for his assistance in the slave's flight to freedom. It expresses Madison's sincere gratitude toward Mr. Listwell for his actions and depicts the compassionate relationships between whites and blacks resulting from a white person's ability and willingness to listen: "As many thanks to you, sir, and to your kind lady, as there are pebbles on the shores of Lake Erie; and may the blessing of God rest upon you both. You will never be forgotten by your profoundly grateful friend" (205). While it is unclear whether or not Mr. Listwell's reformation leads to his own salvation from any type of doomsday judgment by God like the sort suggested in Walker's text, the white man's willingness to listen and consequent reconsideration of black identity does lead to

greater social harmony between the races. In Douglass's novella, the white man's reformation of the ways in which he understands black identity drives the narrative. In Walker's protest pamphlet, it leads not only to the redemption of God's grace but also to more benevolent race relations; in Douglass' "The Heroic Slave," it similarly spawns improved race relations. During a tenuous period that would ultimately lead to civil war, Walker and Douglass desperately attempt to speculate upon the ways in which their country may avoid such a cataclysmic fate. Within their respective texts, the ability to listen so as to reconsider the identity of African Americans as human beings rather than brutes provides a beacon of hope for a group of individuals who have unjustly oppressed a people for hundreds of years.

The trope of listening, which functions as a means of social unification in David Walker's *Appeal* and Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave," is echoed in W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. As Du Bois notes, the inability or unwillingness to listen can bolster a geographic segregation. In his chapter entitled "Of the Sons of Master and Man," Du Bois distinguishes the "natural clustering by social grades common to all communities" from "[a]ll this segregation by color" in the United States, particularly in the post-bellum South. The author notes how a respectable black district may neighbor a white slum just as a "Negro slum may be in dangerous proximity" to a respectable white district. However, one thing "seldom occurs: the best of the whites and the best of the Negroes almost never live in anything like close proximity. It thus happens that in nearly every Southern town and city, both whites and blacks see commonly the worst of each other" (116-117). The dialectical segregation along lines of class and race exacerbates the

tenuous social relations in the South after the Civil War: "One can easily see how a person who saw slavery thus from his father's parlors," in which the best of both races—the master and house-servant—were in close contact and sympathy with each other, "and sees freedom on the streets of a great city, fails to grasp or comprehend the whole of the new picture." Moreover, "the settled belief of the mass of the Negroes that the Southern white people do not have the black man's best interests at heart has been intensified in later years by this continual daily contact of the better class of blacks with the worst representatives of the white race" (117). Du Bois may romanticize the relations between blacks and whites prior to emancipation, for as we have seen, the ability to listen and matters of social harmony do not depend solely on the degree of proximity. Nevertheless, physical segregation certainly complicates the process of listening. Again and again, the social problems stemming from "the question of questions—the Negro problem" revolve around segregation, which sabotages the process of communication: "[I]f one notices carefully one will see that between these two worlds despite much physical contact and daily intermingling, there is almost no community of intellectual life or point of transference where the thoughts and feelings of one race can come into direct contact and sympathy with the thoughts and feelings of the other" (128). As I argue throughout this dissertation, such points of transference upon which Du Bois speculates is, in large part, the domain of literary and film studies. Moreover, the act of listening functions as an integral aspect of such crucial social interactions.

Of course, the point of transference begins with an articulation, or to borrow a term from folklore studies, an utterance. As Du Bois points out, the destiny of "the

millions of black freedmen and their sons" is "so fatefully bound up with that of the nation," yet one "hears so little" concerning "the Negro problem" that there "almost seems to be a conspiracy of silence." As the author notes, the "morning papers seldom mention it, and then usually in a far-fetched academic way, and indeed almost every one seems to forget and ignore the darker half of the land, until the astonished visitor [to the South] is inclined to ask if after all there is any problem here" (127-128). Du Bois worked tirelessly to improve communication between the races, and his efforts were noticed immediately by an employee of the Freedman's Aid and Southern Education Society, who upon reading an essay by Du Bois on the crisis of southern African American education, lauded the author in a personal letter: "I praise God that you had the courage in several paragraphs to state the bald truth that the South needs to hear" (qtd. in Blum 5). More often than not, as the letter to Du Bois indicates, the breakdown in communication is a problem stemming not so much from the lack of voices being raised but from a lack of recognition of said voices.

Thus Du Bois catalogs the African Americans in the nineteenth century who fought for recognition. He claims that David Walker's "wild appeal against the trend of the times showed how the world was changing after the coming of the cotton-gin" (35). The likes of "Forten and Purvis of Philadelphia, Shad of Wilmington, Du Bois of New Haven, Barbadoes of Boston, and others" went largely unheard, for "the trend of the times…refused them recognition save in individual and exceptional cases" (35). As Du Bois demonstrates, the breakdown in communication is due in large part to a lack of

recognition. In other words, the point of transference across racial divides depends not only on the courage to speak but also on the willingness of others to listen.

Recognition is often registered in *The Souls of Black Folk* via the act of listening. Throughout the chapter in which Du Bois lionizes Alexander Crummell, listening functions as a means of recognizing the plight of slaves and African Americans. When Du Bois first met Crummell, he "bowed before this man, as one bows before the prophets of the world" (153). Describing the context in which Crummell was born, Du Bois foreshadows the important role that listening will play in the black man's life: "He was born with the Missouri Compromise…the slave-ship still groaned across the Atlantic, faint cries burdened the Southern breeze, and the great black father whispered mad tales of cruelty into those young ears" (153). As it does in the story of most prophets, as Du Bois describes Crummell, listening functions as a means by which the minister discovers his purpose in life:

> A vision of life came to the growing boy,—mystic, wonderful. He raised his head, stretched himself, breathed deep of the fresh new air. Yonder, behind the forests, he heard strange sounds; then glinting through the trees he saw, far, far away, the bronzed hosts of a nation calling,—calling faintly, calling loudly. He heard the fateful clank of their chains, he felt them cringe and grovel, and there rose within him a protest and a prophecy. And he girded himself to walk down the world. (154-155)

A nation called and Crummell listened. Indeed, listening functions in the life of Alexander Crummell to engender "a new dawn of sympathy and inspiration" (154). The minister's ability to listen to a call from God coincides with his ability to recognize the plight of African Americans in the nineteenth century. Amidst the temptation of doubt, which Du Bois describes as the last of three "temptations he met on those dark dunes that lay gray and dismal before the wonder-eyes of the child" (152), Crummell found "a soul in search of itself" and "striving of one who vainly sought his place in the world" (159). In fact, Du Bois may have proclaimed the wonder-*ears* of the child, for it is via the act of listening that Du Bois represents Crummell's method of struggling "with life that he might know the world and know himself" (152). For twenty years, Crummell wandered "and yet the hard rasping question kept gnawing within him, 'what, in God's name, am I on earth for?'" it asked. "In the narrow New York parish [the church of his father] his soul seemed cramped and smothered. In the fine old air of the English University he heard the millions wailing over the sea. In the wild fever-cursed swamps of West Africa he stood helpless and alone" (159). Crummell, according to Du Bois, worked through his wandering days of doubt, always cognizant of "the millions wailing over the sea," yet Crummell's name, at the time Du Bois writes, "means little, and comes to fifty million ears laden with no incense of memory or emulation" (160). As Edward Blum notes, Du Bois was cognizant of the role that recognition would play in the mission that defined Crummell's life: "Du Bois claimed that Crummell's tale must be heard, for Crummell had braved 'the valley of Humiliation and the Valley of the Shadow of Death'" (86). Crummell's story may be interpreted as an allegory for the author of *Souls*. After all, in

the "Afterthought," Du Bois leaves "God the Reader" with a plea to listen to his testimony so that there may spring "from out its leaves vigor of thought and thoughtful deed to reap the harvest wonderful…Thus in Thy good time may infinite reason turn the tangle straight, and these crooked marks on a fragile leaf be not indeed" (189). Not unlike Crummell, Du Bois possesses that instrumental ability to recognize the cries of his brethren. But while the minister's words too often fell on deaf ears, Du Bois's message in *The Souls of Black Folk* captured the attention of the world.

The "Afterthought" to *Souls* demonstrates but one way in which Du Bois employs the act of listening in his text. It functions not only as a means of social unification, as I will argue below, but also as a means of recognition and a metaphor for reading itself: "Hear my cry, O God the Reader; vouchsafe that this my book fall not still-born into the world wilderness" (189). The reader attains the status of a divine listening-subject. As it will throughout *Souls*, the act of listening, in this opening line of the "Afterthought," functions to represent a communion of sorts. Furthermore, it functions as a means of insight, understanding and reformation: "Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth, and seventy millions sigh for the righteousness which exalteth nations, in this drear day when human brotherhood is mockery and a snare" (189). Du Bois seems to echo Walker, and the similarities between the two authors do not end there.

While hopeful in the conclusion of *Souls*, Du Bois, like Walker (and Douglass for that matter) is in no way naïve. Throughout the text, he highlights "the shadow of a deep disappointment [that] rests upon the Negro people" during the years following

emancipation: “Years have passed away since then,—ten, twenty, forty; forty years of national life, forty years of renewal and development, and yet the swarthy spectre sits in its accustomed seat at the Nation’s feast. In vain do we cry to this our vastest social problem” (4-5). The lack of recognition, as Du Bois argues in “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” renders the Negro impotent, pessimistic, bitter and vindictive: “Feeling that his rights and his dearest ideals are being trampled upon, that the public conscience is ever more deaf to his righteous appeal, and that all the reactionary forces of prejudice, greed, and revenge are daily gaining new strength and fresh allies, the Negro faces no enviable dilemma” (142). Du Bois goes on to address the challenge of gaining the attention of the nation: “It is pitiable that frantic efforts must be made at critical times to get lawmakers in some states even to listen to the respectful presentation of the black man’s side of a current controversy” (123). As we noticed concerning Alfred Hitchcock’s *Blackmail* and Al Jolson’s jazz singer, the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of listening. As Du Bois succinctly states, “[w]e must not forget that most Americans answer all queries regarding the Negro *a priori*, and that the least that human courtesy can do is to listen to evidence” (69). As I have argued here in Chapter Two, Du Bois et al.’s appeal to be heard in the twentieth century echoes the rhetoric of his nineteenth-century abolitionist forefathers.

As it does in the work of David Walker and Frederick Douglass, listening functions in Du Bois’s work as a means of personal insight and understanding that leads to social reformation. If Du Bois’s reader will “vouchsafe that [*Souls*] fall not still-born into the world wilderness” (189), he or she will discover “many things which if read with

patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century" (*xxxi*). The processes of listening and education are reciprocal, which Du Bois explains in "Of the Training of Black Men": "Plain it is to us that what the world seeks through desert and wild we have within our threshold,—a stalwart laboring force, suited to the semi-tropics; if, deaf to the voice of the Zeitgeist, we refuse to use and develop these men, we risk poverty and loss" (63). While the ability to listen functions as a means of enlightenment, the inability to do so leads to destitution. Just as Crummell listens to the call of God, Du Bois begs his nation to heed the call of a generation by way of education:

> And so, in this great question of reconciling three vast and partially contradictory streams of thought, the one panacea of Education leaps to the lips of all:—such human training as will best use the labor of all men without enslaving or brutalizing; such training as will give us poise to encourage the prejudices that bulwark society, and to stamp out those that in sheer barbarity deafen us to the wail of prisoned souls within the Veil, and the mounting fury of shackled men. (64)

The act of listening employed as a remedy to social maladies in Du Bois's sixth chapter foreshadows the story of Alexander Crummell in Chapter XII, in which the clergyman "heard the millions wailing over the sea" (159). The problem of the twentieth century, the color-line, is in many ways a problem of listening. For the "dangerously clear logic of the Negro's position will more and more loudly assert itself in that day when increasing

wealth and more intricate social organization preclude the South from being, as it so largely is, simply an armed camp for intimidating black folk" (74). As I have noted, however, the representation of "the Negro's position," no matter how loudly asserted, needs to be heard in order to be recognized. In the end, Du Bois believes that certain truths must be acknowledged: "Even to-day the masses of the Negroes see all too clearly the anomalies of their position and the moral crookedness of yours. You may marshal strong indictments against them, but their counter-cries, lacking though they be in formal logic, have burning truths within them which you may not wholly ignore, O Southern Gentlemen!" (74). Again, we might interpret Du Bois's explicit argument with his implicit goal. If the counter-cries of "the masses of the Negroes" are metonymically linked to *Souls* then the "Southern Gentlemen" are a microcosm of Du Bois's intended audience, i.e., "O God the Reader."

Du Bois is renowned for declaring the problem of the Twentieth Century to be "the problem of the color-line" (10). As Arnold Rampersad states in his introduction to the Oxford edition of Du Bois's treatise, the "question of the prevailing relevance of *Souls* is nowhere tested more stringently than in [this] assertion" (xxvi). The color-line is the metaphor, which Du Bois borrows from Frederick Douglass,[xxii] for interaction between colonized people and their colonizers: "The world-old phenomenon of the contact of diverse races of men is to have new exemplification during the new century. Indeed, the characteristic of our age is the contact of European civilization with the world's undeveloped people" (114). In many ways, Du Bois defines such contact via the trope of listening: "In the civilized life of to-day the contact of men and their relations to

each other fall in a few main lines of action and communication" (115). Du Bois situates these main lines of communication in domestic, economic, political and intellectual contexts, which makes him a logical inspiration of Richard Wright's existential epistemology represented in the latter's *White Man, Listen!*, in which listening functions within a context of unrelenting fear and narcissism resulting from what may be interpreted as audial castration, i.e., the severing of the sonorous envelope.[xxiii]

Existence comes down to no small matter of recognition; and we must not underestimate the role of such recognition as it concerns the work of African American authors. Over one hundred and twenty-five years after Walker began circulating his protest pamphlet, Richard Wright published *White Man, Listen!*, in which the author from south-side Chicago echoed the abolitionist from Beacon Hill.[xxiv] Like Walker, and Du Bois fifty years before, Richard Wright employs the act of listening in order to address the gulf between blacks and whites around the world. In *White Man, Listen!*, Wright describes the distance, psychologically if not always physically, between the colonizer of the West and the colonized of Africa and Asia:

> A tradition of bitterness has set in; the basic theme is now set, and there is no escape from it. All black lips that now sing pay tribute to the power of oppression. It is true that there was an urge in some black singers to write so that the whites would buy their poems; but in them no less than in others this sense of distance could not be ignored. So, self-consciously, while hiding what they saw and knew to be true, knew to be the real meaning of their lives, some Negro poets

> deliberately put forth the lighter, the more lyrical, side for "white consumption." (120-121)

Wright points out a crucial fact concerning any listening situation: people will often say what the other desires to hear. But, why? Is it simply for monetary gain or is it also the price of desiring recognition at any cost? Either way, the distance about which Wright writes functions as a cog in the listening process. As the author argues, "In the Gold Coast the Britishers [sic] were always alarmed when the Africans went off by themselves to hold their political rallies and were constantly asking; 'What did they say? What are they planning? Don't they want partnership?'" (68). For the cynical reader, this passage may signify the way in which listening functions as a means of oppressing a colonized people. As I will argue below in regards to *Native Son* and Wright's fiction overall, the motivation that leads to the willingness to listen is complex and very much subjective. While the distance prohibiting the colonizer from listening to the colonized may shield the latter from the oppressive force of the former,[xxv] the very same distance may bolster the antagonistic relationship between the two parties.

Like Walker, Wright emphasizes the role that listening plays in the amelioration of race relations around the world. Wright prefaces the importance of listening with a declaration of universal agency: "I cannot, of course, assume that universal goodwill reigns, but I have the elementary right, the bounden duty even, to assume that man, when he has the chance to speak and not without fear, still wishes to be man, that is he harbors the dream of being a free and creative agent" (77). Wright echoes Hegel's master-slave

dialectic here, which depends as much upon recognition as it hinges on the desire for representation:

> Confronted with a range of negative hostility of this sort, knowing that the society of the Western world is so frantically defensive that it would seek to impose conformity at any price, what is an honest man to do? Should he keep silent and thereby try to win a degree of dubious safety for himself? Should he endorse a static defensiveness as the price of achieving his own personal security? The game isn't worth the candle, for, in doing so, he buttresses that which would eventually crush not only him, but that which would negate the very conditions of life out of which freedom can spring. In such a situation one's silence implies that one has surrendered one's intellectual faculties to fear, that one has voluntarily abdicated life itself, that one has gratuitously paralyzed one's possibilities of action. Since any and all events can be lifted by men of bad faith out of their normal contexts and projected into others and thus consequently condemned, since one's thoughts can be interpreted in terms of such extreme implications as to reduce them to absurdity or subversion, obviously a mere declaration of one's good intentions is not enough. In an all-pervading climate of intellectual evasion and dishonesty, everything becomes dishonest; suspicion subverts events and distorts their meaning; mental reservations alter the character of facts and rob them of validity and utility. In short, if goodwill is lacking, everything is lost and a dialogue between men becomes not only useless, but also dangerous, and sometimes even incriminating. (76-77)

Wright goes to great lengths to equate listening with goodwill. When such sentiment is lacking, the process of communication, i.e., the recognition of self-representation, dissolves.

Like Douglass, Wright addresses the subjectivity surrounding listening. Even when an individual is able to self-represent via the spoken or written word, so much depends upon the listener:

> Even the most rigorously determined attitudes of objectivity and the most passionate avowals of good faith have come to be suspect. And especially is this true of the expressions of those who have been doomed to live and cast in a tight web of racial and economic facts, facts viewed by many through eyes of political or religious interest, facts examined by millions with anxiety and even hysteria. Knowing the suspicious, uneasy climate in which our twentieth-century lives are couched, I, as a Western man of color, strive to be as objective as I can when I seek to communicate. But, at once, you have the right to demand of me: What does being objective mean? Is it possible to speak at all today and not have the meaning of one's words construed in six different ways? (74-75)

Wright goes on to illuminate the way in which subjectivity functions within the process of communication: "I shall try to state as clearly as possible where I stand, the mental climate about me, the historic period in which I speak, and some of the elements in my environment and my own personality which propel me to communicate." At this point, after clearly stating his desire for agency, Wright proceeds to emphasize the role of reception:

> The basic assumption behind all so-called objective attitudes is this: If others care to assume my mental stance and, through empathy, duplicate the atmosphere in which I speak, if they can imaginatively grasp the factors in my environment and a sense of the impulses motivating me, they will, if they are of a mind to, be able to see, more or less, what I've seen, will be capable of apprehending the same general aspects and tones of reality that comprise my world, that world that I share daily with all other men. By revealing the assumptions behind my statements, I'm striving to convert you to my outlook, to its essential humanness, to the generality and reasonableness of my arguments. (77-78)

Wright highlights the role that empathy plays in the process of communication. Without empathy, the process of recognition may be exploited for deleterious purposes. Possessing the goodwill that enables one to listen engenders understanding.

Wright declares that the chance to be heard is a universal human right. With agency, of course, comes the expectation of recognition: "I believe that all men should have the right to have their say without fear of political 'powers that be,' without having to dread the punitive measure or the threat of invisible forces which some castes of men claim as their special domain—men such as priests and churchmen. (My own position compels me to grant those priests and churchmen the right to have their say, but not at the expense of having my right to be heard annulled)" (82). What Wright relegates to a parenthetical addendum is of utmost importance to my argument here. For Wright proclaims his right to be heard above and beyond the right of those in a position of institutional power to have their say.

The right to be heard in Wright's argument extends from the context of post-colonial Africa to that of the United States. Like the other authors I have discussed above, Wright represents the ways in which listening is a crucial or, in the parlance of Emerson, a representative characteristic of the author. From phrases such as "I've heard liberal-minded Frenchmen express genuine horror at the lynching of a Negro by Mississippi whites" to "'They want us to be stupid and they want to keep us stupid' is a statement I have heard scores of times both in Asia and Africa" (42), Wright echoes Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois's penchant to listen. Wright continues to make the connection between listening and literacy by explicitly employing the trope as a metaphor for reading itself: "Listen to what Gunnar Myrdal, executive secretary of the Economic Commission for the United Nations, says" (59). Speaking, again, of the psychological distance separating the people of Africa and Asia from the Western world, Wright continues to employ the act of listening for metaphorical purposes: "Listen to the above words with a 'third ear' and you will catch echoes of psychological distance; every sentence implies a measuring of well-being, of power, of manners, of attitudes, of differences between Asia and Africa and the white West…the core of reality today for hundreds of millions resides in how unlike the West they are and how much and quickly they must resemble the West" (29). This passage encapsulates the importance of listening in Wright's conception of literary studies, critical race theory and political discourse in the twentieth century.

By the end of *White Man, Listen!*, Wright provides an explicit and insightful discussion of African American literature. Further defining the connection between his

treatise on post-colonial Africa and his understanding of American literature, Wright imagines the possibilities had Negro authors been more widely recognized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

> Suppose the personalities of many Phyllis Wheatleys of America had been allowed to develop? What a different literary utterance the American Negro might have given voice to! But, as we move on to other Negro literary figures a queer spell at once comes over the scene. We cannot examine other Negro literary figures without taking into account something terrible that was happening to Negroes in the United States. (115-116)

David Walker's *Appeal* reverberates throughout Wright's passage as the latter's words echo the former's proclamation back in 1829: "What a happy country this will be, if the whites will listen" (*Appeal* 73). Although there is no mention of Walker in Wright's text, the twentieth-century author's choice of words for the title of his book may very well have been inspired by the nineteenth-century abolitionist's *Appeal*. In Wright's estimation, the unrequited appeal to be heard has come to define the genre of African American literature: "Remember Phyllis Wheatley and how she was at one with her country? After her time that oneness was no longer possible with Negroes; race hate and Jim Crowism would not let them feel it," Wright reminds his reader, admitting for the "few Negroes who, through luck, diligence, and courage, did rise and make the culture of their nation their own even though that nation still rejected them." Wright acknowledges the crucial role that agency plays in America's literary tradition, but more importantly for my argument, he continues to meditate upon the role of listening to those whom "having

made the culture of their nation their own […] hurled pleading words against the deaf ears of white America until the very meaning of their lives came to be in telling how and what the rejection which their country leveled against them made them feel" (124). The act of listening here, or more precisely the refusal if not inability to listen, functions to represent a form of social segregation. The trope provides Wright with a way of discussing the psychological distance between the races in the United States of America and around the globe. Wright goes on to discuss listening in relation to black authors of the early-twentieth century, most of whom would be considered his literary forefathers:

> During the first quarter of this century, these men, Trotter, Du Bois, Washington, etc. fought as the Negro had never fought before for equal rights, but they fought in vain. It is true that when their voices reached the ears of many philanthropic whites, they did win a few concessions which helped Negro institutions to exist. But the irony in the efforts of these Negroes was that the gains they won fastened ever tighter around their necks the shackles of Jim Crowism. (125)

Wright's thesis concerning the irony surrounding the recognition by white philanthropists of Du Bois, Washington et al. indicates the multitude of ways in which the act of listening functions within the context of American race relations. Furthermore, Wright's literary analysis at the end of *White Man, Listen!* begs an exploration of the ways in which the trope functions in his more widely recognized work of fiction. After all, as Mercer Cook stresses in his review of *White Man, Listen!* in *The Journal of Negro Education*, the "over-all title, [is] appropriate for most of Richard Wright's books" (44). Indeed, the irony about which Wright writes concerning Du Bois, Washington and white

philanthropists at the dawn of the twentieth century echoes that which characterizes Boris Max's willingness to listen to Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*.

CHAPTER THREE: A RHETORIC OF DEAFNESS AND THE LISTENING SUBJECT IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

"Why should he have felt the need to try to make his feelings known? And why did not he hear resounding echoes of his feelings in the hearts of others?"
—Richard Wright's narrator in *Native Son*

"I always hope that what I am writing will arouse some echo in somebody else"
—Richard Wright qtd. in "Interview" with Roland Barthes

"Shall we deny this boy, because he is poor and black, the same protection, the same chance to be heard and understood that we have so readily granted to others?"
—Borris Max in *Native Son*

On March 18, 1940, *The New Republic* published Malcolm Cowley's review of Richard Wright's recently released novel, *Native Son*, in which the literary critic ponders the importance of listening as it concerns Wright's work. Discussing in particular the final section of the text, Cowley argues that Wright is intent on communicating a more sophisticated narrative. Beyond the diegesis, he contends, "is another, more complicated story [Wright] is trying hard to explain, though the words come painfully at first, and later come in a flood that almost sweeps him away. 'Listen, you white folks,' he seems to be saying over and over. 'I want to tell you about all the Negroes in America. I want to tell you how they live and how they feel'" (9-10). Continuing to speak, if you will, for Wright, Cowley goes on to suggest that, when it comes to the author's work, listening functions as a trope, expressing a means of reformation not unlike the way it functions, as I argue above, in the work of David Walker, Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois:

"'I [Wright] want you [white folks] to change your minds about them [Negroes in America] before it is too late to prevent a worse disaster than any we have known. I speak for my own people, but I speak for America too'" (10). Like Cowley, I find the appeal to be heard crucial to Wright's project, which is why, as I will argue below, the author so diligently employs the trope of listening in his effort to communicate the tale of Bigger Thomas, a poor, uneducated, twenty year old black man from South Side Chicago, who vociferously appeals to be heard while tragically failing, himself, to listen.

Like Bigger, Wright appealed to be heard, but unlike his protagonist, Wright possessed a keen capacity to listen, which became an essential characteristic of the author throughout his life: "Since he was a good listener," Michel Fabre explains, Wright "learned a great deal about the lives of these girls" who worked with him in a cafeteria on the ground floor of the Hotel Patricia in Chicago. According to Wright, "the waitresses would come and sit beside me, talking at random, laughing, joking, smoking cigarettes. I learned about their tawdry dreams, their simple hopes, their home lives, their fear of feeling anything deeply, their sex problems, their husbands" (qtd. in Fabre). In "I Tried to Be a Communist," Wright discusses his inclination "to listen to these people [Communists] only to collect material for his future novels" (Fabre 103). Wright's ability to listen to his surroundings was, according to Fabre, as important to the development of the author as were the literary texts that Wright studied so intently. Michael Carter, in an interview with Wright published in *The Afro-American* on January 13, 1945, applauds the author's ability to listen: "A keen observer of his people, Wright is obviously our greatest chronicler. Give him a piece of a conversation and he can finish it in sharp dialogue that

gives you the idea that somehow he heard the original conversation" (reprinted in *Conversations with Richard Wright* 55). Indeed, in the hopes of writing "something with the South Side as a setting and the Blacks who lived there as characters," Wright "practiced recording their speech" (Fabre 86). Page Lewis points to Constance Webb's biography of Wright in order to stress the relationship between the dialogue in *Native Son* and the process of listening: "According to Webb, Wright was so aware of how film-going had '"sensitized the ear" of millions of Americans' to dialogue, that he bought a device called an 'Ediphone' and recorded each of his characters' speeches to check the authenticity of its sound" (Lewis 29). In *American Hunger*, Wright reflects upon the act of listening particularly as it concerns his ability to represent the Bigger Thomases of the world: "For hours I listened to their talk of planes, women, guns, politics, and crime. Their figures of speech were as forceful and colorful as any ever used by English-speaking people. I kept pencil and paper in my pocket to jot down their word-rhythms and reactions" (qtd. in Fabre 108). As I argue above in regards to Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois, listening is a characteristic of the representative author, and so it is an essential quality of Wright.

Wright initially depicts the role of listening in his development as an author and as a chronicler of the Bigger Thomas types, in his essay "How Bigger was Born." When discussing his encounters with the type of people in the South whom Wright collectively refers to as Bigger No. 2, the author refers directly to the act of listening: "[He] would tell us that we were fools not to get what we wanted while we were alive in this world. We would listen and silently agree. We longed to believe and act as he did, but we were

afraid" (855). In this case, listening functions to represent an attempt to believe and a means of engendering hope. Wright goes on, in his essay, to couch the way in which he registered the conditioning of the Bigger Thomas-type in terms of listening: "Sometimes, in areas far removed from Mississippi, I'd hear a Negro say: 'I wish I didn't have to live this way. I feel like I want to burst'" (859). Later, in that same section of his essay, Wright adds: "Sometimes I'd hear a Negro say: 'God, I wish I had a flag and a country of my own'" (859). Wright begins the next paragraph by repeating the phrase "Sometimes I'd hear a Negro," employing the literary technique of repetition, or the poetic technique of cataloging, in order to accentuate the significance of listening. He begins the next paragraph with "I've even heard Negroes," a phrase which he repeats one more time in the following paragraph:

> I've even heard Negroes say that maybe Hitler and Mussolini are all right; that maybe Stalin is all right. They did not say this out of any intellectual comprehension of the forces at work in the world, but because they felt that these men 'did things,' a phrase which is charged with more meaning than the mere words imply. There was in the back of their minds, when they said this, a wild and intense longing (wild and intense because it was suppressed!) to belong, to be identified. (860)

Wright's ability to read the suppressed meaning in what he hears speaks to his skills as a listener, which enhanced his capabilities as a writer. Moreover, it points to the relationship between listening and psychoanalysis. The continued use of listening as a means of interpreting what the Bigger-types say while they themselves seem unable to

fully comprehend it aligns Wright more with his narrator in *Native Son*. As Laura Tanner argues, in "Uncovering the Magical Disguise of Language: The Narrative Presence in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," Wright's narrator seems to understand and render significant that which seems beyond the capacity of Bigger to comprehend.

Perhaps Wright's greatest talent resides in his ability to listen so that others may, in turn, do the same. During an appearance on WHN's program, *The Author Meets the Critics*, chronicled in *PM* on April 15, 1945, Wright discussed his motivation for writing *Black Boy*, yet much of his sentiment could be applied to his writing of *Native Son*: "With plain but poetic phrases and his melodious voice [Wright] had the audience half hypnotized. He seemed to have got through to them as the other speakers had not. 'I wanted to lend, give my tongue to voiceless Negro boys,' he went on. 'I feel this way about the emotionally and economically deprived Negro of the South" and, so it would seem, to the Bigger Thomas's the world over. Wright "lowered his voice and as if reading a psalm quoted Walt Whitman, 'Not until the sun ceases to shine on you will I disown you.' He sighed almost imperceptibly. 'That was one of my motives [in writing],' he said. 'I wanted to give voice to that , to make it known'" ("How Richard Wright Looks at Black Boy" 65). Or, as Malcolm Cowley would apply it to the author's intentions for *Native Son*, Wright wanted to make the Bigger-type heard.

The long passage above, from "How Bigger was Born," begs an analysis of Bigger's desire to be recognized, which he shared with the author. Reflecting on the reception of his early writing, Wright identifies the importance of being heard: "Feeling for the first time that I could speak for listening ears, I wrote a wild, crude poem in free

verse, coining images of black hands playing, working, holding bayonets, stiffening finally in death. I felt that in a clumsy way it linked white life with black, merged two streams of common experience" (qtd. in Fabre 98). As Cowley points out in his prescient review of *Native Son*, and as Fabre reminds us in his biography of the author, Wright thought of himself as a mediator, however naively, and felt that he was being "accepted at face value as a writer who was openly expressing his feelings as a black man" (Fabre 98). Of utmost importance to me is how often the trope of listening is employed to represent the phenomenon of literary, and more generally artistic, recognition. Discussing Wright's satisfaction with the theatrical production of *Native Son* by Orson Welles in 1941, Fabre notes that "Wright had never identified so completely with the black masses; it almost seemed that he was speaking from the stage on their behalf, and apparently his message was often heard" (216). Reflecting on the life and career of Richard Wright nearly a decade after his untimely death, Robert Bone, in 1969, describes the significance of *Native Son's* reception in terms of listening: "*Native Son* was a major breakthrough for the Negro writer. With one powerful thrust, Wright had breached the ghetto walls. He had gained a hearing, claimed a territory, challenged the conscience of a nation" (10). As I have tried to demonstrate, listening plays as crucial of a role in Wright's life and the greater context of his novel's reception as it does in the diegetic world of *Native Son*.

In their article, "In the Vortex of Modernity: Writing Blackness, Blindness and Insight," Karl Precoda and P. S. Polanah explore the significance of self-authorship depicted in the third and final book of *Native Son*. Not altogether unlike Jack Robin's desire for agency in *The Jazz Singer*, Bigger Thomas's impulse to write his own narrative

dominates the latter sections of Richard Wright's novel. Furthermore, Precoda and Polanah contend that *Native Son* "is a story about reading. Or, perhaps more accurately, about misreading" (31). The authors go on to equate Bigger's cultural illiteracy with blindness: "His failure is that of experience: anywhere beyond Black Belt Chicago, and especially at the point of impact of white man's law, the gavel crashing down upon the bench of judgment, Bigger is helpless, prisoner of a deterministic fate that is grounded and plotted by his inability to read, to interpret, in the novel's terms, to see" (31-32). Indeed, throughout Wright's narrative, Bigger is blind but, as I will discuss below, *strangely* so. As Precoda and Polanah argue, "*Native Son*'s rhetoric of blindness thus locates the heart of its, and Bigger's, textual mystery" (32). In the pages below, I intend to build upon their analysis so as to account for the rhetoric of deafness, less explored by scholars of Wright's work and African American literature more generally, which similarly locates the heart of *Native Son*'s textual mystery.

To fully appreciate the role of listening in Wright's narrative, we should take note of the discrepancies between various versions of *Native Son* produced throughout the years. In 1991, The Library of America compiled an anthology of Wright's early works, to include a version of *Native Son* based on the completed page proofs,[xxvi] which as Arnold Rampersad notes, "is the last version of the text that Wright prepared without external intervention" (909). In order to have his novel published by Book-of-the-Month Club, Wright was forced to make significant changes to his novel: "Because major alterations were made in *Native Son* as a consequence of the book club's intervention in the publication process, the text of *Native Son* presented in this volume [*Early Works*,

1991] is that of the bound page proofs, which were sent to Book-of-the-Month Club in August, 1939" (913). As Rampersad explains, some of the changes, made by Wright to accommodate requests from Book-of-the-Month Club, concern "toning down explicit sexual language, altering details of plot, and shortening the speeches of Bigger's lawyer and the district attorney" (912). Furthermore, a "few paragraphs were added" (912).

Particularly relevant to my argument regarding the trope of listening is the addition of an exchange between Mr. Dalton and his wife, Kate, which is not present in the page proofs presented to Book-of-the-Month Club. In the Book-of-the-Month Club publication from 1940, upon which all subsequent reprints were based until 1991, Mrs. Dalton discusses with her husband the case record that the relief agency sent to them regarding Bigger's employment. Mrs. Dalton wants Bigger to begin working that day so as to "evoke an immediate feeling of confidence," per the recommendation from the relief agency, but Mr. Dalton feels they can wait, suggesting that Bigger begin the following day. This exchange between Mr. and Mrs. Dalton is important to the plot of *Native Son* as it explains why Bigger is working the night that Mary surreptitiously goes out with her boyfriend, Jan. If Mr. Dalton were to have had his way, Bigger would not have been in a position to murder his daughter that night. More importantly, for my argument, this passage, added after the original page proofs were sent to Book-of-the-Month Club, depicts the way in which listening allows Wright to represent a sense of alienation in his protagonist. For, while Mr. and Mrs. Dalton discuss the terms of their new hire,

> Bigger listened, blinking and bewildered. The long strange words they used made no sense to him; it was another language. He felt from the tone of their voices that they were having a difference of opinion about him, but he could not determine what it was about. It made him uneasy, tense, as though there were influences and presences about him which he could feel but not see. He felt strangely blind. (Book-of-the-Month Club 48)

The rhetoric of blindness, here, functions to accentuate the act of listening. As Charles Scruggs points out in *Sweet Home: Invisible Cities in the African American Novel*, when "Bigger first comes to the Daltons' neighborhood, its space is like that of a foreign land" (82); just as, I would argue, their tongue is like that of a foreign language. As it will during the scene of Bigger in the car with Mary and Jan, which I will discuss in detail below, the act of listening in this scene in the Daltons' home functions to represent not only a sense of alienation but also a means by which emotion is evoked in Bigger Thomas. He is set on edge by what he hears yet cannot understand; nevertheless, he tunes his ear to the tone of their voice, as he will throughout the novel. Bigger feels strangely blind because he is oddly deaf.

The significance of the act of listening becomes even more pronounced when tracing the differences between the novel, as originally published in 1940, and its adaptation into a film, in which Wright stars as Bigger Thomas and for which he wrote the screenplay over a decade later. For the sake of differentiating between the film and the novel upon which it is based, I will refer to the former by its Argentine title, *Sangre Negra*, so as not to confuse it with the novel, *Native Son*.[xxvii] As Thy Phu notes, narrative

"liberties were indeed taken in the film adaptation, perhaps the most obvious being Bigger's excursion with Bessie to a theme park, a scene which establishes the relationship between the two characters as loving in order to underscore the subsequent viciousness of the latter's murder" (43). More importantly, for my argument, the addition of the scene in which Bigger and Bessie visit a theme park emphasizes the role of listening in their relationship, which will be underscored even more, in the novel if not the film, by the subsequent murder scene to which Phu alludes. Shortly after being hired by the Daltons, in the film, Bigger takes their car out for a test drive at which time he proceeds to pickup Bessie (Gloria Madison) on the South Side in order to take her for what seems to be more of a joy ride. An establishing shot of various amusement park attractions dissolves into a shot of Bigger and Bessie departing the Loop-O-Plane ride, at which point Bessie says, "I don't know if I'm floating or what" as she turns her back to Bigger and the camera. Fearful that she wants to slow down, Bigger implores his girlfriend to persevere: "We can't stop now. We just got started. We have to see everything" (0:16:37). Bigger employs the act of seeing here, as he will at other points in the film and novel, to represent experience, but as the scene progresses, Wright and director Pierre Chenal will turn to the act of listening to depict Bigger's tenuous relationship with Bessie. Grabbing her gently by the arm, Bigger turns to face the camera, at which point, with the wave of his hand, he directs her gaze up and off-screen-left: "What about that roller coaster over there?" Bessie reluctantly agrees to ride the roller coaster on one condition: "Hold me," she says, "if I get scared." Continuing to grasp her

right arm in his hand, Bigger leads her away, while admitting, "[I] always like to hold you baby" (0:16:50).

Worth noting, as it concerns my argument, is Bigger's disregard for Bessie's fear. In what could be dismissed as an innocuous scene, this moment in the film hints at Bigger's inability, or more precisely his unwillingness, to listen to Bessie, a tragic flaw in his character, which becomes more pronounced in the following sequence of shots. The images of Bigger and Bessie walking off-screen-left dissolve into a shot of the couple on the roller coaster. With both Bigger and Bessie clutching the safety rail of the coaster car, Bigger philosophizes: "Sometimes you're up…sometimes your down." Swayed by the motion of the ride, Bigger leans his body toward Bessie's side of the car, screen-left, and concludes: "It's just like life" (0:17:01). Bessie gazes back at Bigger with an illuminating smile on her face, and the two sway back to the right of the screen as she adds: "And you never know when you're going to be up or down" (0:17:04). As the ride continues, Bessie proceeds to inform Bigger that she has something important to tell him. Enthralled by the ride and his sense of satisfaction, Bigger is unaware of what Bessie has said, replying: "What'd you say?" The mechanical sound of the roller coaster and the screams of the other riders registered on the soundtrack make it difficult for the film audience to comprehend Bessie's words: "I'm happy" (0:17:15). Overwhelmed by the sounds of the roller coaster, Bigger cannot recognize his girlfriend's exclamation, responding again: "What'd you say?" and admitting, "I can't hear you" (0:17:17). Determined to communicate her emotional state of mind, however fleeting,

Figure 28

Bessie leans toward Bigger and screams: “I’m happy.” Her exclamation registers clearly on the soundtrack, but Bigger responds ambiguously by laughing, providing Bessie and the audience with scant indication that he hears, better yet recognizes the significance of, her statement. Again, we may disregard the importance of this failed attempt at communication between the couple were it not for the increasingly significant role that listening plays in other more formative moments between Bessie and Bigger.

Another difference between the film and the novel reinforces my argument that the act of listening functions as a means by which Wright depicts the troubled relationship between Bigger and Bessie. In the novel, after she learns that Bigger had in fact killed Mary and that he was on the lamb, Bessie tries to voice her opposition to his planned escape with her: “I been a fool, just a blind dumb black drunk fool. Now I got to run away, and I know deep down in your heart you really don’t care” (660). While this scene, in which Bigger admits to Bessie that he had killed Mary, is not included in the film, Wright manages to incorporate Bessie’s realization that she has been a fool into the film when Bigger informs her of his plan to blackmail the Daltons. Furthermore, Wright uses this scene as an opportunity to insert more language into the film that emphasizes the role of listening as it concerns the relationship between Bigger and Bessie: “I’m a fool to even listen to you,” Bessie tells Bigger (0:47:44). The addition of this dialogue, along with other changes to the narrative in its adaptation for the cinema, can be attributed, in large part, to the original author. While promoting the release of *Sangre Negra*, Wright acknowledged his heavy fingerprint on the film version of his novel: “I can say that I have complete responsibility for the film. I wrote the dialogue. The

producers and the director gave me carte blanche in whatever concerned my role as actor. If the film is bad, it's all my fault" (Martens 149). Of course, for better or for worse, Wright is not solely responsible for the overall quality of the film, but his attempt to take ownership of *Sangre Negra*, particularly as it concerns the dialogue, does speak to Wright's appreciation of the act of listening as a means of developing relationships between characters in his narrative.

Despite these scenes in *Sangre Negra* that do not appear in the book form of *Native Son*, listening still functions in the novel to depict Bigger's deleterious relationship with Bessie. The trope plays a particularly important role in the novel during the scene in which Bigger rapes and then murders his girlfriend. Unlike Bessie, who laments her tendency to heed Bigger's commands, he habitually fails to listen to her. Wright clearly indicates Bigger's utter disregard for Bessie in the novel, informing the reader immediately after Bessie says she has been a "blind dumb black drunk fool" that Bigger "had not listened to what she had said" (660). Listening plays a complicated role in this scene. Bigger is not listening so much for semantic meaning—that is, he is not concerned with the content of Bessie's words—but to say he does not hear her altogether would be inaccurate, for her words do trigger some response in him: "Her words had made leap to consciousness in him a thousand details of her life which he had long known and they made him see that she was in no condition to be taken along and at the same time in no condition to be left behind" (660). In this passage, Wright employs a form of reduced listening, to borrow a term from Michel Chion,[xxviii] which will inform

my argument throughout this chapter. There also seems to be a form of synesthesia, as the words that Bigger *hears* lead him to *see* Bessie in a different light.

Just as it will at other points in the novel, listening functions in this scene as a means by which Bigger gathers information. In the dark and alone with Bessie, Bigger must rely on the sense of hearing to execute his nefarious intentions: "He heard Bessie's clothes rustling in the darkness and he knew that she was pulling off her coat" (662-663). Considering his sexual desire, which will overwhelm him in this scene, the sound of Bessie disrobing only charges Bigger's salacious impulse. Bigger continues to interpret what he hears from his subjective position, a point regarding listening to which I will return: "He heard her sigh, a sigh he knew, for he had heard it many times before; but this time he heard in it a sigh deep down beneath the familiar one, a sigh of resignation, a giving up, a surrender of something more than her body" (663-664). Wright's attention to the narrative use of sound is profound here for the author goes to great lengths in order to situate the meaning of the sounds in the ear of the beholder: "His icy fingers touched inside of her and at once she spoke, not a word, but a sound that gave forth a meaning of horror accepted" (664).[xxix] At this point, it might seem that the narrator and Wright are wed to Bigger's subjective position, interpreting, along with Bigger, Bessie's utterance as acceptance of such horror; but the semantic meaning of the following lines suggest that the narrator and Wright know full-well that Bessie is far from acquiescing: "Her breath went in and out of her lungs in long soft gasps that turned finally into an urgent whisper of pleading. 'Bigger…*don't*'" (italics in the original, Book-of-the-Month Club 219). As Laura Tanner argues, we must distinguish between the interpretive act of listening

enacted by Bigger and that by the narrator and the author.[xxx] As I argued in Chapter One of this dissertation, the refusal to listen lies at the heart of rape, a fact that Wright seems to emphasize in this scene, for, according to the narrator, Bessie's "voice came to [Bigger] now from out of a deep, far-away silence and he paid her no heed" (664). Just as the overwhelming racket of the roller coaster prevents Bigger from hearing Bessie in the 1951 film adaptation of *Native Son*, the complexities of the listening situation here in the novel, i.e., Bigger's selfish sexual desire, occlude him from recognizing her plea as protest:

> The loud demand of the tensity of his own body was a voice that drowned out hers. In the cold darkness of the room it seemed that he was on some vast turning wheel that made him want to turn faster and faster; that in turning faster he would get warmth and sleep and be rid of his tense fatigue. He was conscious of nothing now but her and what he wanted. He flung the cover back, ignoring the cold, and not knowing that he did it. Bessie's hands were on his chest, her fingers spreading protestingly open, pushing him away. He heard her give a soft moan that seemed not to end even when she breathed in or out; a moan which he heard, too, from far away and without heeding. (664)

Wright distinguishes the act of hearing from the act of listening, here, by attaching to the latter an expanded meaning of *heeding*, which is why Bigger, earlier in the scene, can *hear* Bessie complain that she has been a fool while not actually *listening* "to what she had to say" (660). So, too, does he hear her protest only to pay her no mind so as to have his way with her.

In the cinematic adaptation, *Sangre Negra*, Wright and director Pierre Chenal chose to depict Bigger's murder of Bessie by way of a flashback, which complicates the role of listening as it concerns this moment in the narrative. Already in jail for killing Mary, Bigger narrates to Max his account of how he ended Bessie's life. The representation of this scene in the film is less graphic than that depicted in the novel, perhaps due to censorship.[xxxi] The flashback is rife with metaphorical images of Bigger in the cotton fields of the Deep South, yet devoid of the trope of listening that enriches the written text. While the act of listening, as I have argued above, is accentuated in several scenes of the film, it actually functions to a much greater extent and in more sophisticated ways in the novel. Indeed, listening functions throughout *Native Son* not only as a form of obedience, which I have noted is expressed by Bessie toward Bigger, but also as a means of cultural consumption; as a means of ideological indoctrination; as a means of evoking and registering emotion; as a means of gathering information; as a means of silencing, marginalizing and subjugating an Other, while still, at other times, functioning as a means of recognition and a potential remedy for an otherwise overwhelming sense of alienation in the modern world.

In Book One of the novel, when Bigger, Mary and her boyfriend, Jan Erlone, visit Ernie's Kitchen Shack, listening functions as a means of cultural consumption within the context of a search for authenticity. In fact, the act of cultural consumption takes several forms early on in this scene. During a conversation in the car, eating comes to function as a trope for the consumption of black cultural life: "'We want to go to a *real* place,' Mary said, turning to [Bigger] gaily. 'You want to go to a night club?' he asked in a tone that

indicated that he was simply mentioning names and not recommending places to go. 'No; we want to eat.' 'Look, Bigger. We want one of those places where colored people eat, not one of those show places'" (509-510). The trope of looking functions here as a means of establishing the power dynamics of Mary's relationship with Bigger, which is ironic considering her desire to treat Bigger as an equal, but it will be the trope of listening that comes to represent the power-dynamics between Bigger and the white world—a point to which I will return. I am more concerned with Wright's use of listening, as this scene develops, to represent Mary's quest for authenticity via the consumption of music. We should not dismiss Mary's desire to share in an authentic experience with the black community, whether that experience come in the form of food or music. When discussing Bigger's physical and psychological hunger after he faints at the coroner's inquest in Book Three, Ross Pudaloff stresses the role that consumption plays throughout the novel: "Bigger's hunger after the coroner's inquest emphasizes the importance of consumption in a novel where many of the critical episodes occur, during, or because of, eating and drinking" (162). In this same scene, as Pudaloff proceeds to point out, Bigger desires to read what the newspapers are writing about him: "It can be no accident that these two forms of consumption are linked in the text" (162). Similarly, I find it more than coincidental that Wright includes language referencing the consumption of black food in a scene during which Mary and Jan will also seek to listen to black music.

Again, the differences between the novel and the 1951 film version accentuate the role of listening as it relates to this scene in the narrative. Once Bigger, Mary and Jan are seated inside of Ernie's Kitchen Shack, in the novel, "[s]omebody put a nickel in an

automatic phonograph and they listened to the music" (514). Wright does not specify the song playing on the phonograph here, so it is difficult to gauge the importance of this moment of musical consumption in the novel; however, in the film, the role of cultural consumption via listening to music will acquire greater significance. While, in the novel, Bessie is at Ernie's merely as a patron, retreating to a corner of the restaurant after encountering Bigger with Mary and Jan; in the film, she is at Ernie's to perform for the patrons. "Wright more oddly makes Bessie a blues singer for the film instead of the alcoholic nonentity she is in the novel," as Page Lewis points out, and this change "begs the question which of Wright's Bessies is the *right* Bessie?" (emphasis in the original 28). While "[d]ebating such a question in a classroom provides a lively introduction to the imponderables of literary theory" (Lewis 28), I am more concerned with questions relating to the function of Bessie as a blues singer in the cinematic adaptation of Wright's narrative, for pursuing this line of inquiry informs my discussion of cultural consumption via the act of listening. When the film cuts to the image of Mary gazing at Bessie's performance, the former turns to Bigger and exclaims: "All colored people are so gifted, don't you think so" (0:23:56). In this scene, listening functions as a means by which Mary and Jan attempt to connect with African American culture.

Listening, which has functioned in this scene as a method by which Mary and Jan search for an authentic form of cultural consumption also functions as a means of appropriation and ideological indoctrination. As Precoda and Polanah note, when Mary and Jan "try to draw [Bigger] into 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' he refuses, scoffing 'Hell, that ain't the tune.' To Bigger, Mary's and Jan's naïve attempts to appropriate black

discourse and cultural codes are intrusive and insulting" (35). In the novel, when Bigger, Mary and Jan are listening to the music playing on the phonograph, Bessie approaches the trio only to walk away to "a far table" where she sat "with another girl" (514). Jan tries, however awkwardly, to compliment Bigger: "'You got something there,' Jan said, looking at Bigger. 'Did I say that right, Bigger'" (514). As when he sings "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" with Mary, Jan attempts to appropriate black discourse and cultural codes here when making this comment to Bigger. More importantly, for my argument, he consults Bigger for confirmation as to the authenticity of his cultural mimicry. Whether he knows it or not, Bigger, at this moment, becomes an authority of sorts as the listening subject and assumes some form of influence if not power. However, any semblance of authority he may gain as a listening subject is displaced quickly as Jan employs the trope of listening at the end of this scene inside Ernie's in order to represent a means of indoctrination. Upon learning that Bigger's father was killed down south in a riot without any form of retribution, Jan proselytizes: "'Listen, Bigger, that's what we want to *stop*. That's what we Communists are fighting. We want to stop people from treating others that way. I'm a member of the Party. Mary sympathizes. Don't you think if we got together we could stop things like that?'" (emphasis in the original 515). Similar to the way Mary uses the trope of looking in the beginning of this scene, Jan implores Bigger to listen in an attempt to establish the power dynamics in their relationship; moreover, he attempts to indoctrinate the twenty year old in the ways of Communism with this command to listen.[xxxii]

While listening functions to represent Mary and Jan's consumption and appropriation of black discourse and Jan's attempt to indoctrinate Bigger into the Communist Party, it functions predominantly, in this scene and throughout the novel, as a means by which Wright creates a sense of alienation that subsequently evokes a range of emotions in his protagonist. As I have argued, when Bigger first interviews for the job with the Daltons, listening functions to accentuate his sense of alienation from the white world, and that marginalizing effect of listening stems not only from the conversation he hears. Upon entering the Daltons' household, the sound of music, as Bigger hears it, serves to draw a distinction between the twenty year old from the South Side and the white world in which he finds himself: "On the smooth walls were several paintings whose nature he tried to make out, but failed. He would have liked to examine them, but dared not. Then he listened; a faint sound of piano music floated to him from somewhere. He was sitting in a white home; dim lights burned round him; strange objects challenged him; and he was feeling angry and uncomfortable" (487). The narrative use of sound, the piano, works along with the visual imagery of the paintings on the walls to trigger raw, negative emotions in Bigger.

Later that night, when Bigger is riding around town with Mary and Jan, listening functions similarly to evoke emotion. Wedged between the two in the front seat of the Daltons' family car, "Bigger listened to the tone of their voices, to their strange accents, to the exuberant phrases that flowed so freely from their lips" (509). Mary and Jan's strange tongue seems to strike a chord in Bigger's ear not unlike "the long strange words" uttered by Mr. and Mrs. Dalton earlier in the day. It seems as if the more the semantic

meaning of what has been spoken escapes Bigger, the more adeptly he can interpret the tone of voice in which it was said. Of course, Bigger's tragic misreading of Bessie's tone of voice during the scene in which he rapes and murders her, which I discuss above, calls into question Bigger's ability to accurately listen in a reduced manner. Nevertheless, these scenes exemplify the degree to which listening is subjective. Moreover, when listening to Mary and Jan exalt the beauty of the Chicago skyline, "Bigger looked without turning his head; he just rolled his eyes" (509). Mary and Jan's comments regarding the sights of the city accentuate their distance from Bigger, and his response to what he hears—the rolling of his eyes—indicates a sense of bewilderment. Listening to Mary had already made Bigger feel self-conscious earlier in this scene: when the former asks the latter if he is a tattle-tale, Bigger "opened his mouth to reply, but no words came. What she had asked and the tone of voice in which she asked it made him feel that he ought to have answered in some way; but what?" (504). Bigger's sensitivity to people's tone of voice will trigger a variety of reactions by the young man. In this case, it engenders a sense of alienation, bewilderment, self-consciousness and, above all, fear, which explains Wright's choice title for Book One of *Native Son*.

Indeed, Wright employs listening to evoke and register myriad emotions in Bigger and others. While some of these emotions, e.g., pride, relief, hope and love, will fall into the category of positive reactions to external stimuli, more often than not, the emotions engendered by the act of listening are negative in nature, particularly those feelings of anxiety, fear and guilt. For example, listening functions as a means by which Wright evokes in Bigger anxiety concerning his protagonist's possibilities of employment with

the Dalton family. During the interview with Mr. Dalton, Mary's presence, particularly her conversation with her father, causes Bigger to worry about his chances of working for the Daltons. Upon entering the room where her father is interviewing Bigger, Mary asks if he belongs to a union. Mr. Dalton interjects, unhappy with Mary's line of inquiry, but his daughter persists: "'Well, Father, he should,' the girl said, turning to him, then back to Bigger. 'Do you?'" (493). As she will later that night when asking Bigger if he is a tattletale, Mary's question triggers Bigger's emotion: "He hated the girl then. Why did she have to do this when he was trying to get a job?" (493). Bigger's bewilderment and anger soon turns into anxiety, all of which is registered via the act of listening, as Mr. Dalton calls after his daughter who had exited into the hallway:

> Mr. Dalton rose and left the room, [Bigger] sat still listening. Once or twice he thought he heard the girl laugh, but he was not sure. The best thing he could do was to leave that crazy girl alone. No wonder they called her a Communist in the movies. She was crazy, all right. He had heard about unions; in his mind unions and Communists were linked. He relaxed a little, then stiffened when he heard Mr. Dalton walk back into the room. (494)

It is worth noting that Wright attaches the point-of-audition in the novel to Bigger's perspective just as he situates the third person limited point-of-view. Bigger's emotions are triggered not only by what he hears Mary say to him directly regarding unions but also by what he cannot hear Mary and her father say out in the hallway. Though Bigger tries to listen, he cannot be certain if the sound he hears is Mary laughing. His reaction to what he hears (and to what he cannot hear) seems to represent paranoia. For Bigger's

anxiety, in this instance, stems from his belief that Mr. Dalton would listen to and somehow be influenced by what Mary had said: "Wordlessly, the white man sat behind the desk and picked up the paper and looked at it in a long silence. Bigger watched him with lowered eyes; he knew that Mr. Dalton was thinking of something other than that paper. In his heart he cursed the crazy girl. Maybe Mr. Dalton was deciding not to hire him? Goddamn! Maybe he would not get the extra five dollars a week now?" (494). If, in fact, Mr. Dalton would be less likely to hire a union member, let alone a communist, Mary's interrogation could only help Bigger's chances of securing the job for she gave him an opportunity to inform Mr. Dalton that he was not, in fact, a member of a union. This scene involving Mary, Bigger and Mr. Dalton depicts one way in which listening functions to evoke a sense of anxiety, and it highlights the complexities of any listening situation—for listening depends more on what one thinks he or she hears and less on what is in fact said.

The anxiety, produced in Bigger as a result of listening to Mary and her father during the interview, turns to guilt and downright fear in later scenes, consistently registered, in part if not entirely, via the trope of listening. While Bigger is butchering Mary's dead body in order to dispose of it in the furnace, a "noise made him whirl; two green burning pools—pools of accusation and guilt—stared at him from a white blur that sat perched upon the edge of the trunk. His mouth opened in a silent scream and his body became hotly paralyzed" (531). Again, Wright employs both visual imagery—two green burning pools—and sound to trigger Bigger's fear of being caught.[xxxiii] After realizing that he had left ajar the door leading down to the basement, allowing the family pet to

enter the cellar, Bigger "closed the door and stood again before the furnace, thinking, Cats can't talk" (531). As Precoda and Polanah argue, the impulse to write his own story drives much of *Native Son*; however, Bigger's desire to have his story heard, i.e., recognized, has not yet emerged at this point in the narrative. For, at the end of Book One, Bigger's fear of being caught leads him to question, however briefly, the danger of a cat squealing. The irrational fear that leads Bigger to consider the possibility of the house pet reporting the crime that has taken place may cause us to read his internal monologue in a comic light: "Should he catch the cat and kill it and put it in the furnace, too?" (531). Of course, save the fact that an air shaft in a vacant tenement on the South Side stands in for the Daltons' furnace, this is exactly what Bigger does to his girlfriend, Bessie, out of the same fear that she, unlike the cat, can and, perhaps, will talk. Again, Wright demonstrates the ways in which the act of listening is impacted by matters of subjectivity. Bigger's fear regarding his existential place in the world makes him terrified of just about everything he sees and, more importantly for my argument, everything he hears.

Listening continues to function in this scene as a means of evoking emotion. When Bigger disposes of Mary's body, Wright describes the sounds of the furnace in detail, employing a narrative use of the soundscape in the novel that makes the dearth of sound representing the furnace in the film version of this scene particularly confounding. For example, while the film focuses visually on the image of the furnace via a shot that tracks into the center of the flames, there is no sound of the furnace on the soundtrack; whereas, in the novel, when Bigger had nearly the entirety of Mary's body in the fire, he "looked into the furnace; her clothes were ablaze and smoke was filling the interior so

that he could scarcely see. The draft roared upward, droning in his ears" (531). Again, the rhetoric of blindness accentuates the narrative use of sound here in the novel. The sound of the furnace could be read as representing a sense of guilt a la the heartbeat in Edgar Allen Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart," but listening is in the ear of the beholder. Once Mary's entire body is in the furnace, Bigger "pulled the lever and coal rattled against the sides of the tin chute and he saw the whole furnace blaze and the draft roared still louder" (532). The roar of the blaze incinerating the incriminating evidence that has come of Mary's dead body provides Bigger with a sense of relief, but the smell of a burning body, or the threat thereof, soon triggers a sense of panic in Bigger. In another passage included in the Book-of-the-Month-Club edition of the novel but absent from the 1991 Library of America edition, Wright employs the narrative use of sound to signify a shift in emotion from fear back to relief: "He saw the smutty blades of an electric exhaust fan high up in the wall of the basement, back of the furnace. He found the switch and threw it. There was a quick whir, then a hum. Things would be all right now; the exhaust fan would suck the air out of the basement and there would be no scent" (91).[xxxiv] Wright depicts the sense of smell just as well, if not as often, as he uses sound and the trope of listening. We might say that Wright employs an audial-olfactory contract in this scene to establish a sense of relief in Bigger, for it is the smell of the burning body dissipated by the exhaust fan along with *the hum* of the fan and *the roar* of the blaze cremating the traces of Bigger's crime that calms his nerves, for the time being.

Of course, the range of emotions depicted by Wright via the act of listening is perhaps greatest during the scenes of Bigger's imprisonment and subsequent courtroom

hearings. The anxiety described in Book One of the novel during the interview at the Daltons' household is amplified in Book Three when Bigger awaits his fate in a jail cell: "Again there was silence and Bigger's taut nerves ached to fill it up" (723). Silence, here, is a crucial element of the soundscape. Whereas the roaring sound of the furnace produced a sense of relief in Bigger, the silence in his jail cell engenders a sense of dread that he wishes to escape.

Throughout Book Three of the novel, Wright will continue to employ the act listening as a means of evoking emotion. While in jail, Bigger is visited by his mother along with Reverend Hammond, and Wright depicts the manner of ways in which the preacher's words "registered themselves in [Bigger's] consciousness." As the narrator explains, Bigger knew "without listening what they meant; it was the old voice of his mother telling of suffering, of hope, of love beyond this world. And he loathed it because it made him feel as condemned and guilty as the voice of those who hated him" (709). As he will so many times, Bigger listens to a different frequency, if you will. Many characters would interpret the preacher's words in a positive light, but not Bigger. As I have and will continue to argue throughout this chapter, Bigger practices a form of reduced listening, which in the end, is slave to subjectivity. For as Reverend Hammond continues to advise the condemned man to think about saving his soul in the after life, "Bigger sat very still, listening and not listening. If someone had afterwards asked him to repeat the preacher's words, he would not have been able to do so. But he felt and sensed their meaning" (709). Concerned less with the semantic (or literal) meaning of the preacher's words, the narrator describes the psychological impact of what Bigger hears:

"As the preacher talked there appeared before [Bigger] a vast black silent void and the images of the preacher swam in that void, grew large and powerful; familiar images which his mother had given him when he was a child at her knee; images which in turn aroused impulses long dormant, impulses that he had suppressed and sought to shunt from his life" (709). The sounds registered in Bigger by his act of reduced listening engender images that in turn trigger long-repressed impulses, exemplifying, again, the way in which the act of listening evokes negative emotions in this scene just as it will throughout *Native Son*.

In addition to functioning as a means by which the author depicts the production of emotions in Bigger, listening also allows Wright to depict a means by which his characters, particularly Bigger, register emotions and intentions in others. For instance, Bigger recognizes, in what he hears from his prison cell, the tension between Max, Jan, Reverend Hammond and Buckley: "Bigger listened to the men talk, feeling in the tones of their voices a deep hostility toward one another" (717). Again, the act of reduced listening leads Bigger to interpret the tone in which those around him talk to one another. The recognition of emotion via listening allows Wright to depict the ways in which Bigger more or less reads his surroundings.

Bigger repeatedly listens so as to gauge the intentions of those around him. When depicting the scene in which Buckley approaches Bigger in jail to discuss the opportunity of an insanity plea, Wright employs the trope of listening in a variety of ways: "'If you talk, maybe the judge'll help you. Confess it all and get it over with. You'll feel better. Say, listen, if you tell me everything, I'll see that you're sent to the hospital for an

examination, see? If they say you're not responsible, then maybe you won't have to die'" (733). As it has during conversations with Mary and Jan, listening functions here to establish Buckley's position of power over Bigger. Of course, the trope of *seeing* functions as a means of representing the act of comprehending the significance of Buckley's offer, but more importantly for my argument, the trope of *listening* functions as a means of persuading Bigger to heed the man's advice. On an implicit level, this passage hints at the potentially therapeutic function of listening—if only Bigger will confess (as if to a priest), then he will "feel better"—but explicitly, the trope functions as a means of persuasion: "'Listen, start at the beginning. Who was the first woman you ever killed?'" (733). Buckley repeatedly tells Bigger to listen in order to illicit a confession, but the narrator's description of Bigger's response reiterates the latter's capacity to listen in a reduced manner, i.e., listen for the underlying intention motivating a given speech: "[Bigger] said nothing. He wanted to talk, but he did not like the note of intense eagerness in the man's voice" (733-734). As he does in the beginning of this scene when listening to Buckley speak with Reverend Hammond, Max and Jan, Bigger tunes his ear to the inflection of Buckley's voice in order to read his surroundings. But, in the end, Bigger does not trust his initial inclination, deciding instead to confide in Buckley. Again, Bigger's ability to listen and interpret the various tones of voice he encounters throughout the novel is compromised. Consequently, Bigger talked "[l]istlessly" with words that "came out flat and dull" while "[w]hite men were looking at him, waiting for his words" (734). It is worth noting that Wright does not reference the act of listening when describing Bigger's interrogators. The white men "looked" at

Bigger, which may seem like an inconsequential choice of words until we account, as I will below, for the significance of Borris Max's ability and willingness to listen to Bigger later in the novel. But I am getting ahead of myself. Having confessed, Bigger "felt more lost and undone than when he was captured […] There was a short silence. Bigger felt that they had forgotten him already" (734). The sensation of being lost is connected to Bigger's sense of having gone unheard. If listening functions to signify a form of remembering, as I suggest in Chapter One of my dissertation, then the failure to listen may just as well signify the act of forgetting. After Buckley and the other police officer leave his prison cell, "Bigger felt so empty and beaten that he slid to the floor. He heard the feet of the men walking away softly. The door opened and shut. He was alone, profoundly, inescapably" (735). Bigger feels anything but the relief Buckley had promised would come from a confession. As a result of Buckley et al.'s unwillingness to listen, Bigger feels isolated, marginalized and alone, which again, is all the more important when discussing Max's effect on Bigger later in the novel.

After inserting seven periods— . . . . . — to imply a form of elliptical editing not unlike a fade to black in film, Wright continues to depict Bigger sobbing on the floor of his prison cell, repeatedly employing the trope of listening as a means of representing a lack of trust and an absence of recognition. Unlike the final scenes of Book One, the impulse to have his story acknowledged, and more precisely heard, now overwhelms Bigger:

> He wept because he had once again trusted his feelings and they had betrayed him. Why should he have felt the need to try to make his feelings known? And

> why did not he hear resounding echoes of his feelings in the hearts of others? There were times when he did hear echoes, but always they were couched in tones which, living as a Negro, he could not answer or accept without losing face with the world which had first evoked in him the song of manhood. (735)

Bigger's question concerning why he should wish "to make his feelings known" is far from rhetorical, in fact it drives my inquiry concerning *Native Son*. Moreover, Bigger's desire to "hear resounding echoes of his feelings in the hearts of others" is the same impulse that drove Wright to write in the first place.

Indeed, much of Book Three revolves around such desire, as will Wright's later fiction, particularly the posthumously published *A Father's Law*. Years later, in an interview with Roland Barthes, Wright all but quotes his first best-selling novel when explaining his own motivation for writing: "I always hope that what I am writing will arouse some echo in somebody else" ("Interview" 166). Within the process of listening lies the potential for, if not promise of, recognition. For a black author publishing in Jim Crow America, as for any author to a certain degree, making one's feelings known is paramount. Thus, we should not dismiss this question as it relates to *Native Son* and American literature more generally; for Bigger repeatedly ponders the importance of being heard: "Many times, when alone after Max had left him, he wondered wistfully if there was not a set of words which he had in common with others, words which would evoke in others a sense of the same fire that smoldered in him" (786). Listening functions here as a means of registering the emotion of passion, or any other emotion for which "fire" could be thought of as synonymous. In addition to *registering* emotion, however,

listening functions, in this passage and throughout the novel, as a means of *recognizing* emotions in others, i.e., empathizing. But before I discuss the ways in which the trope functions as a means of empathizing or understanding one another, I should address the various ways in which it functions as a means of gathering information.

More often than not, Bigger listens out of his own self-interest for survival. Wright establishes listening as a trope for acquiring information during the formative scene in which Bigger escorts the Daltons' inebriated daughter to her bedroom. In an effort to occlude any tears from the bankers' daughters who may read his novel,[xxxv] Wright implicates Bigger throughout this scene just as he will during the scene in which Bigger rapes and murders Bessie. By paying close attention to the trope of listening, we are more likely to recognize Bigger's dubious intentions: "She pulled heavily on him, her arm about his neck. He pushed the door in and took a step inside and stopped, waiting, listening" (522-523). Bigger understands the consequences of being caught alone with a white woman in her bedroom but that risk does not stop him. As his "fingers felt the soft curves of her body he was still, looking at her, enveloped in a sense of physical elation. This little bitch! he thought. Her face was touching his. He turned her round and began to mount the steps, one by one. He heard a slight creaking and stopped" (523). Listening functions here to create an element of suspense, working on the psyche of the main character, not unlike that which is evoked by the sound of the cat at the conclusion of this scene when Bigger is disposing Mary's body in the basement. In an attempt to confirm the source of the sound on the stairs, Bigger "looked, straining his eyes in the gloom. But there was no one" (523). Michel Chion discusses the unnerving sensation created by the

presence of sound without a visual source for such sound.[xxxvi] While Chion is writing about the use of sound in cinema, Wright exploits the same technique in his novel. As this scene progresses, Bigger—sans the ability to see—continues to scope the surroundings with his ears: "He tried to stand [Mary] on her feet and found her weak as jelly. He held her in his arms again, listening in the darkness" (524). Wright's use of listening here heightens the suspense of this scene, and the author proceeds to use the soundscape for the complimentary state of surprise. As Bigger begins to fondle Mary, "[h]e was aware only of her body now; his lips trembled. Then he stiffened. The door behind him had creaked" (524). This time, the source of the sound is confirmed to be Mrs. Dalton entering the bedroom. Via the act of listening, Wright injects a sense of surprise just as he will develop an atmosphere of suspense in this scene, all the while allowing Bigger to gather information.

Listening is quite obviously relevant to Mary's mother. Katie Dalton is blind and must rely on senses other than eyesight to gain information concerning her surroundings. Aware of her condition, Bigger knows that it is in the realm of touch and sound that his presence would be betrayed: "He knew that Mrs. Dalton could not see him; but he knew that if Mary spoke she would come to the side of the bed and discover him, touch him." More germane to my argument, Bigger fears the discovery of his presence in the room by inadvertently producing what would be an incriminating sound: "He waited tensely, afraid to move for fear of bumping into something in the dark and betraying his presence" (525). Listening functions here as a means by which the author registers the risk of exposure. When Mrs. Dalton calls out to her daughter, Bigger felt Mary move and

proceeded to smother her head with a pillow. At which point, Wright reiterates Bigger's fear of being heard: "He wanted to move from the bed, but was afraid he would stumble over something and Mrs. Dalton would hear him, would know that someone besides Mary was in the room" (525). Ironically, in regards to my argument concerning listening, Bigger's inability to see due to the darkness enveloping Mary's bedroom imperils him—if he could see, he would be able to avoid bumping into any objects that might produce an incriminating sound. This passage establishes the relationship between listening and range of knowledge. According to Bigger's syllogism, if he flees from Mary's bedside, he may stumble over something, producing a sound, and then, logically, incriminating himself by leading Mrs. Dalton to assume that Mary is not alone. Of course, Bigger's logic may be flawed, for if indeed Mrs. Dalton hears something, what would stop her from thinking that Mary, and her daughter alone, produced it? My concern, however, is less with Bigger's capacity for deductive reasoning and more with Wright's deployment of the act of listening to represent a means of gathering information, in this case on the part of Mrs. Dalton.

As Mrs. Dalton leaves Mary's bedroom, listening functions, as it does in the scene when Bigger rapes and murders Bessie, as a means of recognizing the presence of life and the subsequent loss thereof. Like Bessie, Mary exhales a sigh, the significance of which is registered in Bigger's consciousness: "As he took his hands from the pillow he heard a long sigh go up from the bed into the air of the darkened room, a sigh which afterwards, when he remembered it, seemed final, irrevocable" (526). As I argue above, Wright registers Bigger's recognition of Bessie's death via the act of listening:

"Gradually his breath subsided until he could no longer hear it and then he knew for certain that Bessie was not breathing. The room was filled with quiet and cold and death and blood and the deep moan of the night wind" (668). So, too, does Wright depict Bigger's recognition of Mary's death:

> Gradually, the intensity of his sensations subsided and he was aware of the room […] He could not hear her breath coming and going now as he had when he had first brought her into the room! He bent and moved her head with his hand and found that she was relaxed and limp. He snatched his hand away. Thought and feeling were balked in him; there was something he was trying to tell himself, desperately, but could not. Then, convulsively, he sucked his breath in and huge words formed slowly, ringing in his ears: *She's dead*. (526-527)

The significance of the sigh that Bigger heard escape Mary's lips only moments earlier when her mother was still in the room is determined by what Bigger does not hear now that Mrs. Dalton has left the room, now that "the intensity of his sensations" have subsided. The dearth of sound in the room, or more precisely the lack of sound emanating from Mary's body, is what leads Bigger to remember, "afterward," her sigh as "irrevocable" and, indeed, "final."

As I have tried to demonstrate, listening is a subjective act, not altogether void of self-serving intentions. As soon as Bigger realizes that Mary is dead, Wright employs the act of listening as a means by which his protagonist will stay one step ahead of those individuals and those institutions of authority that pursue him: "He heard the clock ticking. Time was passing. It would soon be morning. He had to act. He could not stand

here all night like this; he might go to the electric chair" (529). As this passage demonstrates, listening is subjective. When Bigger hears the clock ticking, he thinks of the preciousness of time. The sound of the clock, as registered in his mind, signals to Bigger a countdown of sorts, like a clock in the most serious of sporting events. The soundscape, and Bigger's recognition of it, continues to heighten the drama in this scene: "He thought he heard a noise and straightened; it seemed to him that his breathing was as loud as wind in a storm. He listened and heard nothing" (529). The sound of his own breath in *his* ear seemed to betray him, again emphasizing the subjectivity in listening; but when it comes to being caught, Bigger heard nothing. Nothing, that is, until he hears, while in the basement disposing of Mary's body, a noise that "made him whirl" (531). But as mentioned above, Bigger realized it was nothing more than the family pet, and he soon remembered, as if needing to convince himself: "Cats can't talk" (531). Bigger's active listening, depicted here at the conclusion of Book One, resurfaces throughout Book Two, particularly as he eavesdrops on the Dalton family and the investigators pursuing the case of Mary's disappearance.

In some instances, merely listening is not enough to gain the requisite information. Despite his attempt, earlier in the novel, to listen to Mary and Jan discuss a meeting the latter had attended along with Max earlier in the day, Bigger cannot glean much from what he hears: "Bigger listened; he knew that they were talking Communism and he tried to understand. But he couldn't" (516). As when Mr. and Mrs. Dalton discuss the case report written by the relief department, Bigger is unable to make sense of what he hears when it comes to Mary and Jan's conversation concerning communism—this

anecdote points to the distinction between simply hearing and listening, which when functioning as a trope takes on the extended meaning of understanding or comprehending. Despite his inability to gather concrete information during these moments, such passages are worth noting as they point to Bigger's penchant to listen to his surroundings, which enables him to outwit at times those in pursuit of Mary's murderer. For instance, after Bigger slips the ransom note under the Daltons' front door, he encounters Peggy in the kitchen with the note, unopened, in her hand. When she leaves the kitchen to deliver the envelope to Mr. Dalton, Bigger "strained his ears to catch sounds. But none came" (619). The drama or suspense here hinges on what Bigger (and, as a result of the point-of-audition around which Wright structures his novel, the reader) cannot hear. Peggy returns to continue catering to Bigger in the kitchen, offering him more coffee and talking about Mary's immature behavior, which keeps her parents worried so often. "The thing was in the open now;" Bigger thinks to himself, "not all of it but some of it. Nobody knew about Mary yet. He saw in his mind a picture of the Dalton family distraught and horrified when they found that Mary was kidnapped. That would put them a certain distance from him. They would think that white men did it; they would never think that a black, timid Negro did that" (619-620). When Mr. Dalton returns, he informs Peggy, Mrs. Dalton—who had entered after her husband—and Bigger that he believes Mary to have been kidnapped according to the ransom note he just read: "Bigger, without moving an eyelid, felt his skin grow hot and his muscles stiffen" (620). Again, what he has heard triggers an emotional response in Bigger. After Peggy exits the kitchen along with Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, Bigger finds himself alone: "Again the thought

that he had the chance to walk out of here and be clear of it all came to him, and again he brushed it aside. He was tensely eager to stay and *see* how it would all end, even if that end swallowed him in blackness" (my emphasis 621). In fact, Bigger would stay in order to *hear*, more often than not, how it all would end. He would not flee just yet; rather, Bigger would eavesdrop on the family and the investigators in order to maintain that "certain distance" that had been described earlier in this scene.

Ultimately, Bigger exploits the distance that had originally engendered his sense of alienation earlier in the novel. While he is still in the kitchen, where Peggy, Mr. Dalton and his wife had left him, "[t]here came to his ears a muffled sound of sobs. Then suddenly silence" (621). Bigger tries to make sense of what he hears, or more precisely what he does not hear, sensing the import of both. "What's happening?" he wonders:

> Would Mr. Dalton phone the police now? He strained to listen, but no sounds came. He went to the door and took a few steps into the hallway. There were still no sounds. He looked about to make sure that no one was watching him then crept on tip-toe down the hall. He heard voices. Mr. Dalton was talking to someone. He crept farther; yes, he could hear….*I want to talk to Britten please*. Mr. Dalton was phoning. *come right over please yes at once something awful has happened I don't want to talk about it over the phone* That meant that when Britten came back he would be questioned again. *yes right away I'll be waiting*. (621-622)

By eavesdropping on Mr. Dalton's phone call, Bigger can better prepare himself for the inevitable interrogation by Britten, again maintaining a sort of distance from the individuals pursuing him and exploiting it for his purposes. As Scruggs explains, what

Bigger "will end up doing is rearranging the space of the Daltons' house, making their space his own. Not only does he usurp the space of Mary's room by killing her, but after her death he transforms the basement—his space in the social spectrum—into the symbolic center of the house" (*Sweet Home* 82). So, too, does Bigger transform the room in which he resides at the Daltons' house, particularly the closet: "He went to his room, into the closet, closed the door and listened. Silence. He came out, left the door open and, in order to get to the closet quickly and without a sound, pulled off his shoes" (622). Bigger is painfully aware of the potential for sound to betray his actions, not unlike the moment when he was next to Mrs. Dalton beside Mary's bed and afraid that he may make an incriminating sound if were he to move. Moreover, Bigger transforms the closet, reconfiguring it into a listening post to which he will return repeatedly. For, after nearly falling asleep while contemplating his next step, Bigger "bounded off the bed, listening, thinking that he had heard voices. He had been so deeply taken up with his own thoughts that he did not know if he had actually heard anything or had imagined it" (622). Unable to spy visually, Bigger struggles, however momentarily, to believe his ears:

> Yes; he heard faint footsteps below. He hurried to the closet. The footsteps ceased. There came to him the soft sound of sobbing. It was Peggy. Her sobbing quieted, then rose to a high pitch. He stood for a long time, listening to Peggy's sobs and the long moan of the wind sweeping through the night outside. Peggy's sobs ceased and her footsteps sounded once more. Was she going to answer the doorbell? Footsteps came again; Peggy had gone to the front of the house for

> something and had come back. He heard a heavy voice, a man's. At first he could not identify it; then he realized that it was Britten's. (623)

It is not clear if Bigger registers the significance of Peggy's emotions, mingled with the sounds of the wind moaning outside; i.e., there is no way to say with certainty that listening is employed, here, to register emotion; however, it is apparent that Wright uses the trope in order to render Bigger—via the narrator, of course—as a conduit for the reader. For as I mentioned earlier, one of the most important authorial decisions regarding *Native Son* is the fact that Wright chose to narrate the story from the third person limited point of view or, more precisely for my argument, the third person limited point of audition.

Bigger stays in the closet in order to eavesdrop on Britten's interrogation of Peggy concerning the ransom note. He is able to discern—again, for the reader and for himself—the content of their conversation. The non-verbal sounds that he hears seems to pique Bigger's curiosity: "Britten's voice ceased. There was the sound of other heavy feet. Chairs scraped over the floor. More people were in the kitchen. Who were they? Their movements sounded like those of men. Then Bigger heard Britten speaking again" (623). It is quite understandable that the sounds of chairs dragging across the floor would lead Bigger to conclude that more people had joined Britten and Peggy, but how exactly the sounds that he overhears lead Bigger to surmise that they are produced by men is not so clear to this reader, but that is beside the point. Bigger continues to eavesdrop on Britten's interrogation of Peggy, which ultimately turns into a discussion of the newly hired help around the house: "When Britten's voice ceased Bigger was smiling,"

reiterating the way in which Wright uses the act of listening—as he does during the scene in the basement when Bigger discovers the exhaust vent—to register a sense of relief in Bigger. "Yes; Britten was trying to trap him, trying to make out a case against him; but he could not find anything to go upon" (624). Bigger is able to gain an advantage over Britten, in what at this point amounts to a cat-and-mouse crime thriller, via the former's ability to listen to the latter's intentions. As Bigger continues to eavesdrop, he attempts to read the non-verbal sounds reverberating from downstairs into the closet upstairs where he remains kneeling on the floor: "Was Britten coming to talk to him now? There came the sound of other voices." Then there "was the sound of a door opening and more footsteps" (624-625). In addition to interpreting the non-semantic sounds produced from below, Bigger also manages to cipher the semantic meaning. In fact, he learns from what Britten tells the others in the room that they are going to pick up Jan who would potentially inform the police and the press:

> Bigger knew that Mr. Dalton had not wanted to notify the police; that much was certain. But how long would he hold out? The police would know everything as soon as Jan was picked up, for Jan would tell enough to make the police and the newspapers investigate. But if Jan were confronted with the fact of the kidnapping of Mary, what would happen? Could Jan prove an alibi? If he did, then the police would start looking for someone else. They would start questioning him again; they would want to know why he had lied about Jan's being in the house. But would not the word "Red" which he had signed to the ransom note throw them off the track and make them still think that Jan or his comrades did it? Why would

> anybody want to think that Bigger had kidnapped Mary? Bigger came out of the closet and wiped sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. He had knelt so long that his blood had almost stopped and needle-like pains shot from the bottom of his feet to the calves of his legs. (625-626)

The listening station, i.e., the closet in his bedroom, serves as a location from which Bigger can eavesdrop on Britten. What he hears informs Bigger's response to Britten's pursuant interrogation. As I have argued, these scenes depict in striking detail one of the important ways in which listening functions as a means of gathering information, knowledge that allows the pursued to gain an advantage on his pursuer; but I want to move on to a discussion of the most important function of listening as it concerns *Native Son*. For ultimately, Wright employs the trope not only to represent the marginalization of a racialized Other but also to depict the recognition of an otherwise alienated individual.

While I have expounded on the ways in which listening serves Bigger's self-interest, it also functions to reinforce the young man's sense of alienation from the world around him. As I discuss above, Bigger feels alienated from the discussion between Mr. and Mrs. Dalton regarding his employment and the case report from the relief agency, not to mention the sounds of the piano music playing in the background of this scene, which makes him feel angry toward, uncomfortable with and detached from his surroundings: "He had not expected anything like this; he had not thought that this world would be so utterly different from his own that it would intimidate him" (487). When Jan and Mary discuss communism, Bigger feels as alienated as when Mr. and Mrs. Dalton discuss the

case report from the relief agency—listening to Mary sing "Sweet Low, Sweet Chariot" comes to represent the cultural distance between Bigger and white people no matter how sincere her attempts to consume, if not appropriate, black discourse may be (517). Perhaps not surprisingly then, Bigger feels a profound sense of alienation and inferiority when listening to his lawyer, Borris Max, state his case in court:

> Bigger heard Max's last words ring out in the courtroom. When Max sat down he saw that he saw that his eyes were tired and sunken. He could hear his breath coming and going heavily. He had not understood the speech, but he had felt the meaning of some of it from the tone of Max's voice. Suddenly, he felt that his life was not worth the effort that Max had made to save it. (826-827)

As is the case at other points in the novel, the sound of the human breath is important to the interpretation of this scene for it represents the effort Max makes on Bigger's behalf. Furthermore, as he has throughout the novel, Wright employs the act of reduced listening here. Bigger does not understand the content of what he hears, for just as he is alienated from Mr. and Mrs. Dalton's conversation concerning the relief agency's case report, so too is he unfamiliar with the legal discourse that Max employs in his speech during the courtroom hearing; however, Bigger does sense the significance of the speech by reading the tone of his lawyer's voice. As a result, the speech leads Bigger to feel inferior and less significant than Max's effort to save his life. Once again, Wright has employed the act of listening to elicit a reaction in Bigger, and that reaction more often than not stems from his interpretation of the tone in which something has been said regardless of his ability or lack thereof to comprehend the content of such speech.

Just as the act of listening engenders in Bigger a sense of inferiority and alienation, so too does the failure of others to listen to him. As several scholars have noted, Bigger wants to write his own narrative.[xxxvii] Toward such ends, Bigger struggles, throughout Book Three, with his desire "to try to make his feelings known" (735) and the overwhelming sense of futility stemming from such efforts. Part of "the impact of oppression on the black psyche" that Bernard Bell rightly situates at the heart of *Native Son* is explored via the trope of listening. While being escorted from the courtroom to the Cook County jail cell, having been found guilty of murder, Bigger feels a grave sense of hopelessness: "Bigger wanted to take enough air into his lungs to scream, 'Yes! I was scared!' But who would believe him?" (759). The act of listening, which has functioned throughout the novel to represent a means of believing, is implied here in the narration. We, the readers, can ill afford to dismiss Bigger's rhetorical question, for it has been on the mind of many a black man dating as far back as David Walker, who recognized that some people's cups are too full to allow for the recognition of a black man's subjective position in the world. Fearing that no one will understand, or in the parlance of my project—listen—Bigger decides to cease repeating his futile attempts to "make his feelings known" (735). Instead, he vows to "go to his death without ever trying to tell men like these what he had felt that night" (759). Bigger's sentiment speaks to the importance of recognition, and it echoes Walker's argument. Wright's inclusion of the phrase "men like these" points to those people whose cups are overflowed, to use Walker's rhetoric. In this sense, a tree that falls in the woods, if you will pardon the

cliché, may make a deafening sound, but with no one able, or better yet willing, to listen, who cares? Not Bigger.

And not Wright, for whom Bigger, in this sense, becomes a sort of surrogate. As Kenneth Kinnamon notes, the "general similarities between Wright at the age of twenty and the fictional protagonist of *Native Son* are obvious enough." Futhermore, Kinnamon reminds us, "[m]ore specific likenesses were recovered from Wright's subconscious by Dr. Frederic Wertham, the eminent psychiatrist" ("*Native Son*: the Personal, Social, and Political Background" 66). Wright's biographer, Michel Fabre notes that with the production of *Native Son*, "[i]t was as if Wright intended to speak his mind, free himself from the burden of his message, even at the expense of the story," (174) which Bigger will accomplish, to some degree, by the end of the novel. Despite the fact that the author "tried to steer clear of too great an intimacy" with his protagonist, Wright "was coming to identify more and more with Bigger" (Fabre 174). As Bernard Bell reminds us, "[a]lthough much of the narrative comes to us through the consciousness of Bigger Thomas, it is a consciousness rendered in the language of Richard Wright" (157-158). The author writes out of a desire for self-representation, which tends to engender a desire for recognition of such efforts.

Soon after the original publication of *Native Son*, prominent African American critics emphasized the role that the listener would play in its success. As will be the case with Bigger's formative acts in the novel, the recognition of Wright's work is as vital as the telling. In January of 1941, Alain Locke delineates the role of reception as it concerns *Native Son* within the greater context of American literature: "America cannot any more

afford to ignore the issues in this book than she could in 1853, when *Uncle Tom's Cabin* anticipated Lincoln's insight in saying: 'This land cannot long continue to exist half-slave and half-free.' And as before, it is not just a plea for the Negro, but a challenge to the nation and its own enlightened self-interest" ("Untitled Review of *Native Son* 20). Locke testifies on behalf of Wright's challenge to the nation to listen. In an article published in *New Masses* on August 5, 1941, Ralph Ellison picks up on Locke's point: "In their broader implications, the problems of American Negro fiction are not problems of the Negro writer alone. They are the problems of all who are interested in the defense of American culture" (18). Not unlike Cowley, Ellison and Locke reiterate David Walker's syllogism from 1829: "[I]f the whites will listen" then, indeed, what a happy country this would be (73). For the impact of *Native Son* depends on the public's ability and willingness to listen, which is why Wright penned "a book which takes you by the ears and gives you a good shaking, whirls you on your toes and slaps you dizzy against the wall" (Bennett Davis qtd. in Kinnamon 124). As Kenneth Kinnamon adds, when "the reader regained full consciousness, one supposes, he or she could then ponder the message Wright had conveyed with such overpowering force" (124). The earliest reviews, along with more contemporary criticism of *Native Son*, seem to focus, as much as its author, on the trope of listening, either explicitly or implicitly, to register the novel's impact.

The emphasis placed on listening both in Wright's biography and in the reception of his novel, lends even greater significance to its use in the scenes between Bigger and his lawyer, Borris Max. The initial appearance of Max in the narrative is prefaced by a

passage reflecting the need in Bigger for connection with another human being: “For the first time since his capture, Bigger felt that he wanted someone near him, something physical to cling to” (767). Bigger’s desire for closeness with another human being will be registered via the ear of his lawyer. As Laura E. Tanner argues, throughout “the novel, the narrative voice makes deliberate links between Bigger’s acts of violence and his desire to communicate. ‘The impulsion to try to tell’ we are told at one point ‘was as deep as had been the urge to kill’” (132). Moreover, the desire to be heard was as deep as Bigger’s impulse to tell. In this sense, Tanner echoes Bernard Bell’s argument, when pointing out how the narrator “distort[s] our perception of his existence by framing it within a highly metaphorical context” (133). Indeed, the narrator functions as the supreme listener, again serving as a greater surrogate for the author than Bigger. As this passage in *Native Son* progresses, Wright employs the narrator and the act of listening for the additional function of registering Bigger’s sense of relief: “He was glad when he heard the lock in his door click. He sat up; a guard loomed over him. ‘Come on, boy. Your lawyer’s here’” (767). Unbeknownst to Bigger at this point in the narrative, his lawyer will be the one to provide this sought after intimacy articulated in the beginning of this scene, i.e., the person to whom Bigger will cling, however momentarily.

As soon as lawyer and client meet, listening defines their relationship. As I have argued above, listening functions, in part, as a means of establishing power dynamics in a relationship: “‘Now, listen, Bigger. I want you to tell me all about yourself. . .’” (768). Max’s command—now, listen—accentuates his authoritative status in this relationship not unlike that of Britten, who originally investigates the murder of Mary, and later

Buckley, who only moments prior to this encounter with Max had instructed Bigger to "'[l]isten, boy,' […] 'Say, listen, if you tell me everything, I'll see that you're sent to the hospital for examination'" (729-733). Of course, these previous exchanges, in which Bigger does eventually disclose his emotions to Buckley, caused the prisoner to weep "because he had once again trusted his feelings and they had betrayed him. Why should he have felt the need to try to make his feelings known?" (735). These disappointing exchanges in which Bigger had listened to "his feelings," if not the authorities imploring him to disclose his story, leads him to vow, while being asked to recreate his crime for the investigators in the Daltons' home, that he "would go to his death without ever trying to tell *men like these* what he had felt that night" (my emphasis 759). This is the context into which Max enters and this is the reason behind Bigger's response to his lawyer's plea: "'Mr. Max, it ain't no use in you doing nothing!'" (768). Nevertheless, Max feels compelled to convince Bigger to heed his advice: "'Listen, Bigger, you're facing a sea of hate now that's no different from what you've faced all your life. And because it's that way, you've *got* to fight. If they can wipe you out, then they can wipe others out, too'" (768-769). While Bigger vowed to "go to his death without ever trying to tell men like [Britten, Buckley et al.] what he had felt," perhaps, he wonders, Max was different than *those men*. Indeed, Max's attempts to make Bigger listen seem to succeed, for this exchange between lawyer and client rekindles Bigger's desire to be heard: "His talking to Max had evoked again in him that urge to talk, to tell, to try to make his feelings known" (771). Again, Bigger wants desperately to tell his tale: "A wave of excitement flooded him. He felt that he ought to be able to reach out with his bare hands and carve from

naked space the concrete, solid reasons why he had murdered. He felt them that strongly" (771). Bigger's impulse to tell his story speaks to the act of creation inherent in storytelling and essential to Bigger's existential reading of his murderous acts. If only Bigger could articulate the motivation for his actions, "he would relax; he would sit and wait until they told him to walk to the chair; and he would walk" (771). Of course, as I have intimated, Bigger's telling is merely a precursor to someone's listening, whether that someone is Max, the narrator, Wright himself or his reader. For Bigger feels an urge not only to tell but also to make his feelings heard.

Listening continues to function as a means by which Wright represents the process of recognition as a potential counter-balance to the alienating forces at work in Bigger's world. After Max leaves Bigger in the prison cell, the latter meditates on the significance of their exchange: "Bigger stood in the middle of the floor, not moving. He was not stoop-shouldered now, nor were his muscles taut. He breathed softly, wondering about the cool breath of peace that hovered in his body. It was as though he were trying to listen to the beat of his own heart" (781). At this point, listening functions as a means by which Bigger recognizes his own humanity. Of course, such recognition stems from Max's ability and willingness to listen to Bigger's self-representation. He "could not remember when he had felt as relaxed as this before" (781). Bigger's previous attempts to disclose his feelings had resulted not in relaxation and relief but in frustration and anger. But his telling to Max was different: "He had not thought of it or felt it while Max was speaking to him; it was not until after Max had gone that he discovered that he had spoken to Max as he had never spoken to anyone in his life; not even to himself. And his

talking had eased from his shoulders a heavy burden" (781). The mere telling of his perspective motivates Bigger to connect with other human beings. What appears to have changed is not so much Bigger's attempt to articulate his feelings but Max's ability to recognize those emotions. After all, his confession to Max leads to relief and a sense of peace, the kind of which he could not recall. Having said that, "He was suddenly and violently angry. Max had tricked him!" (781). Bigger returns his attention, momentarily, to the pseudo-listeners who in the past have disappointed him. Bigger's paranoia stems from the other characters in the novel who, for pernicious reasons, have encouraged him to talk: "But no. Max had not compelled him to talk; he had talked of his own accord, prodded by excitement, by a curiosity about his own feelings. Max had only sat and listened, had only asked questions" (781-782). Indeed, Max had only sat and listened, which makes all the difference. As Bigger wonders, so might the reader: "Why had Max asked him all those questions? He knew that Max was seeking facts to tell the judge" (782). Bigger's point here speaks to the subjective, self-serving aspect of listening; however, the act of listening—or more precisely the feeling of being heard—has greater significance, as Bigger soon realizes. For, "in Max's asking of those questions he had felt a recognition of his life, of his feelings, of his person that he had never encountered before" (782). This moment in the novel encapsulates my argument concerning the trope of listening in *Native Son*, African American literature and American arts and letters more generally. For, listening functions as a means of recognizing one's humanity and as a means of confirming one's sense-of-self.

Whether Max can fully understand Bigger even after listening to the young man's narrative is difficult to determine. In the final scene of the novel, the process of listening and what that process entails is as complicated as in any other part of the novel: "There was silence. Max was at his side. The man who had lured him on a quest toward a dim hope was there. Well, why didn't he speak now? Here was his chance, his last chance" (842). Perhaps the fear of going unrecognized when he spoke, as on so many occasions prior to this moment, explains Bigger's trepidation. Clearly, he feels anxious disclosing his emotions to another individual: "He lifted his eyes shyly to Max's; Max was looking at him. Bigger looked off. What he wanted to say was stronger in him when he was alone; and though he imputed to Max the feelings he wanted to grasp, he could not talk of them to Max until he had forgotten Max's presence" (842). Despite his anxiety to speak openly to Max, Bigger's greater fear of remaining silent or inarticulate seems to override his hesitancy: "[F]ear that he would not be able to talk about this consuming fever made him panicky. He struggled for self-control; he did not want to lose this driving impulse; it was all he had" (842). Still, Bigger is unsure: "And in the next second he felt that it was all foolish, useless, vain" (842). Bigger cuts short his effort to communicate with Max, "and in the very moment he stopped, he heard himself talking with tight throat, in tense, involuntary whispers" (842).

The act of listening to himself will take on greater significance at the end of this scene, but for now I want to highlight Bigger's struggle to communicate, i.e., to talk *and* to be heard. Again paying greater attention to the tone of voice, i.e., how something is said, than to the content of what is said, Bigger continues: "[H]e was trusting the sound of

his voice rather than the sense of his words to carry his meaning" (842). At this moment, Bigger is depending on his listener to register the significance of his statement via the act of reduced listening. He tries to express his appreciation of Max's efforts, only to falter: "Under the pressure of a feeling of futility his voice trailed off. After a short silence he blurted, 'I just r-r-reckon I h-had it coming. . . .' He stood up, full now, wanting to talk. His lips moved, but no words came" (842). Max asks Bigger if there is any help he can provide the condemned man, and Bigger feels the weight of his response: "[He] looked at Max's grey eyes. How could he get into that man a sense of what he wanted? If he could only tell him!" (842). But, Bigger "could not talk" (843). Of course, even if he could talk, would Max be able, or better yet willing, to listen? Bigger certainly ponders the chances:

> Max reached over and placed a hand on his shoulder, and Bigger could tell by its touch that Max did not know, had no suspicion of what he wanted, of what he was trying to say. Max was upon another planet, far off in space. Was there any way to break down this wall of isolation? Distractedly, he gazed about the cell, trying to remember where he had heard words that would help him. He could recall none. He had lived outside of the lives of men. Their modes of communication, their symbols and images, had been denied him. (843)

Bigger's thoughts regarding his alienation from the modes of communication and the lives of men conjure in him the sense of alienation experienced when listening, earlier in the novel, to Mr. and Mrs. Dalton discuss the relief agency's report, their "long strange words […which…] made no sense to him; [as] it was another language" (Book-of-the-Month-Club 48). More significantly, this scene echoes Richard Wright's experience in

the world of publication circa 1940. In "How *Native Son* was Born," Kenneth Kinnamon compares Bigger's relationship with Max to that of Wright's association with Edward Aswell: "[A] white liberal from Tennessee and Harvard who had been Thomas Wolfe's editor and was to become Wright's valued friend may even be regarded as standing in relation to Wright as Max stands in relation to Bigger: sympathetic, loyal, analytical, understanding, to a point, but not quite ready to accept the full and uncut expression of a sensibility so radically different from his own" (122).

Bigger desperately seeks a universal form of communication, one that would enable him to speak and allow others to listen. Accordingly, his thoughts return to Max, who "had given him the faith that at bottom all men lived as he lived and felt as he felt. And of all the men he had met, surely Max knew what he was trying to say" (843). But as Scruggs points out, Bigger is a text that cannot be read (*Sweet Home* 99); and as Barbara Johnson notes, what "the communist lawyer, Max, cannot hear is precisely Bigger's 'I am,' his ascension to the status of speaking subject" (149). When confronted, again, with Max's inability to comprehend his words, "Bigger felt that he had been slapped. Oh, what a fool he had been to build hope upon such shifting sand!" (844). The narration here will be echoed by Bessie in the film version of Wright's novel, when she exclaims: "I'm a fool to even listen to you" (0:47:44). Perhaps because Max seemed to have listened to him earlier when preparing his defense, or perhaps because he has mere moments left to live, Bigger felt "he had to *make* him know!" (844). Bigger has to find the words to make Max listen again. Bigger wants Max to realize the significance of the latter's recognition of the former's humanity: "'That night you asked me to tell all about myself,' he

whimpered despairingly. 'Oh' [Max responded]. He saw Max look at the floor and frown. He knew that Max was puzzled. 'You asked me questions nobody ever asked me before. You knew that I was a murderer two times over, but you treated me like a man. . . .'" (844). As I suggest above, Wright very well could have been alluding to the work of David Walker when coining the title for *White Man, Listen!*, and the same supposition could be made concerning this dialogue between Bigger and Max. After all, Walker's plea was, in large part, for white men to listen and recognize African Americans as full members of the human race. Over one hundred years later, albeit in a work of fiction, Max recognizes Bigger's humanity despite the brutal truth that he had murdered two women. More importantly, as it concerns my argument, Wright, a la Walker, registers such recognition via the trope of listening.

In the end, though, Bigger's effort to tell his own narrative is recognized by no one greater than himself. When Bigger's thoughts turn to his fate as a condemned murderer, it is as if he is speaking to himself: "'Mr. Max, how can I die!' Bigger asked; knowing as the words boomed from his lips that a knowledge of how to live was a knowledge of how to die" (845). Indeed, Max's response seems to confirm Bigger's revelation: "'Men die alone, Bigger'" (845). In fact, Bigger would die as he lived—alone—but not before having his life recognized by Max, and most importantly, I believe, by himself. To some extent, Bigger's self-recognition seems to supersede any recognition of Max's existential response, for "Bigger had not heard him. In him again, imperiously, was the desire to talk, to tell; his hands were lifted in mid-air and when he spoke he tried to charge into the tone of his words what he *himself* wanted to hear, what *he* needed" (

845). Although Wright employs the act of listening as a means of registering recognition in this passage, Bigger uses the trope of seeing: "'Mr. Max, I sort of saw myself after that night. And I sort of saw other people, too'" (845). Of course, the trope of *seeing* functions as a form of recognition—in fact, it is the more conventional choice of words in Western rhetoric by which we express an acquisition of knowledge, which is why I am so intrigued by Wright's persistent return to the trope of *listening*: "Bigger's voice died; he was listening to the echoes of his words in his own mind" (845).

Bigger's self-recognition certainly evolves throughout the narrative. When Mr. Dalton first asked if he was Bigger Thomas, Bigger responded almost mechanically: "'Yessuh,' he whispered; not speaking, really; but hearing his words roll involuntarily from his lips" (488). This passage, as it appears in the original publication in 1940, concludes with the phrase, "as of a force of their own" (Book-of-the-Month Club 47). The addition of that final phrase, absent from the page proofs sent out for original publication, accentuates the lack of agency Bigger feels prior to killing Mary. Moreover, during the formative scene in Mary's bedroom, just after Mrs. Dalton has exited the scene, Bigger "relaxed and sank to the floor, his breath going in a long gasp. He was weak and wet with sweat. He stayed crouched and bent, hearing the sound of his breathing filling the darkness" (526). Bigger's recognition that Mary is dead, the germ of his agency, is registered via the act of listening, when "convulsively, he sucked his breath in and huge words formed slowly, ringing in his ears: *She's dead*. . . ." (527). The lack of quotation marks around the words—*she's dead*—suggests that Wright may have intended these words to be read as an internal monologue, which implies a form of internal

listening. I have discussed, above, the ways in which listening to his own voice (or desires) overrides Bigger's consideration of others—lest we forget that "[t]he loud demand of the tensity of his own body was a voice that drowned out" Bessie's protestation as Bigger proceeds to rape and murder his girlfriend (664). Clearly, Wright does not represent the act of listening as a utopian elixir to all ailments of society, for it enables the most horrific acts in the novel. Again, Bessie's murder, like that of Mary, is registered in Bigger's mind via the act of listening; but with the negation of Bessie's life comes a recognition of his own, both of which are registered in the audial realm: "Fear was in him again; he strained his ears. Didn't he hear her breathing? He bent and listened. It was his own breathing he heard; he had been breathing so loud that he had not been able to tell if Bessie was still breathing or not" (667). When back in the Dalton household, in Book Three, to recreate his initial crime, Bigger recollects the moment Mrs. Dalton was in Mary's bedroom as he was smothering her daughter: "Bigger remembered as he looked at her [Mrs. Dalton] that moment of stark terror when he had stood at the side of the bed in the dark blue room hearing his heart pound against his ribs with his fingers upon the pillow pressing down on Mary's face to keep her from mumbling" (703). Bigger remembers his sense of self-recognition. Later, after speaking with Max in jail, the sounds of breaths and heartbeats mingle in Bigger's ears, reinforcing his newfound sense-of-self:

> Back in his cell, Bigger stood in the middle of the floor, not moving. He was not stoop-shouldered now, nor were his muscles taut. He breathed softly, wondering about the cool breath of peace that hovered in his body. It was as though he were

> trying to listen to the beat of his own heart. All round him was darkness and there were no sounds. He could not remember when he had felt as relaxed as this before. He had not thought of it or felt it while Max was speaking to him; it was not until after Max had gone that he discovered that he had spoken to Max as he had never spoken to anyone in his life; not even to himself. (781)

Of course, we realize by the narration at the end of the novel that Bigger, ironically, had been speaking and listening to himself the entire time, which may be the "more complicated story" that originally caught Malcolm Cowley's attention—dare I say, ear—in March of 1940.

CHAPTER FOUR: "PAYING FULL ATTENTION TO A PART": THE TROUBLE WITH LISTENING IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *A FATHER'S LAW* AND ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S *ROPE*

> "When Zarathustra had spoken these words he beheld the people again and was silent. 'There they stand,' he said to his heart; 'there they laugh. They do not understand me; I am not the mouth for these ears. Must one smash their ears before they learn to listen with their eyes?'"
>
> —Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy implores his readers to expand the parameters of academic discourse concerning Richard Wright. "Analysis of Wright's legacy," Gilroy argues,

> has been impoverished as a result of his being overidentified with the same narrow definitions of racialised cultural expression that he struggled to overturn. The part of his work which resists assimilation to the great ethnocentric canon of African-American literature have been left unread, and much of it is now out of print. On either side of the Atlantic, historians of European literature and philosophy have shown little interest in his work or in its relationship to those European writers and schools of expression with whom he interacted […] Historians of ideas and movements have generally preferred to stay within the boundaries of nationality and ethnicity and have shown little enthusiasm for connecting the life of one movement with that of another. What would it mean to read Wright intertextually with Genet, Beauvoir, Sartre, and the other Parisians with whom he was in dialogue? (186)

Inspired by Gilroy's charge, I would like to expand my discussion of Richard Wright, which I developed in chapters two and three of this dissertation, beyond the confines of African American discourse. Hence, I will listen to Gilroy, so as to ask what it would mean to read Wright intertextually with a film director who, at first, seems most unrelated to the author—Alfred Hitchcock.

Wright and Hitchcock make odd bedfellows. However, both author and director were interested in psychology, criminology, and philosophy, incorporating such subject matter into most, if not all, of their work; both were captivated by the Loeb and Leopold case in 1924, in which two teenagers were prosecuted for killing a fourteen-year-old boy in Chicago in an attempt to commit the perfect murder; and both artists had keen ears. Indeed, they had big ears, to borrow a phrase from jazz culture, which very well may explain why they employ so profoundly the use of sound for narrative purposes and incorporate the trope of listening into many, if not all, of their respective texts.

By now, it is well documented that Wright was intrigued by the Loeb and Leopold case. As Robert Butler points out, there are many similarities between the trial of Loeb and Leopold and the courtroom hearing in *Native Son*: "When arguing their respective client's motives, [Clarence] Darrow and [Borris] Max employ similar concepts, words and phrases" (558). Butler goes on to discuss the similar role that age plays in both the historical and fictional cases:

> Darrow advised the judge that the defense would offer "evidence of the mental condition of the defendants" in order "to show the degree of responsibility that they had" as a way of mitigating their offense, emphasizing the "youth" of his

> clients. Max uses very similar words to express the same idea to the fictional judge: "I shall endeavor to show the mental and emotional attitude of the boy and the degree of responsibility he had in the crime," and he, too, stresses his intention to "offer evidence to the youth of this boy." (558)

However, the most striking evidence of Wright's interest in the Loeb and Leopold case is the author's last novel, *A Father's Law*, which was not published until three years after Butler wrote his article. Perhaps it is more than coincidental that Tommy Turner, one of the main characters in *A Father's Law*, is nineteen-going-on-twenty, the same age as Bigger. In an early review of *A Father's Law*, Taylor Parson describes Tommy "as a middle-class 'analytical' Bigger Thomas struggling both for and against the society and the father that have produced him" (97). As Julia Wright claims, Tommy "remains linked to my father's interest in the Leopold and Loeb case and Wright's admiration for Clarence Darrow's defense based on dis-eased minds" (xii). Such interest merits placing Wright's novel alongside Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), which was released over a decade before Wright wrote *A Father's Law* and was also inspired by the Loeb and Leopold case. [xxxviii]

As Julia Wright goes on to argue in the introduction to her father's last novel, which was penned in Paris shortly before his death in 1960 but not published until 2008, Wright must have had Hitchcock in mind when writing *A Father's Law*: "My father would definitely have seen *Rope*, say in the early 1950s" (*xii*). As Wright's biographer Michel Fabre has noted, the author was an avid filmgoer. In *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, he reports that Wright would attend up to as many as three films in a

single day. So, certainly, cinema influenced his writing, and upon further analysis, the relationship between *A Father's Law* and *Rope* will become only more apparent. As Julia Wright describes it,

> Hitchcock's scenario portrayed two rich, white, brilliant, neo-Nazi teenager students attempting to commit the 'perfect' murder by killing a young Jewish boy and hiding his body in a wooden chest in their dining room, meanwhile inviting their friends and university professor to dinner—with the body concealed right there. It is the teacher, who is in touch enough with the minds of the two young murderers, who becomes suspicious. (*xii*)

Indeed, it is the *teacher* in Hitchcock's film, just as it will be the *father*, not to mention the Chief of Police, in Wright's novel—both patriarchal figures—who are "in touch" and become suspicious because they listen and are able, eventually, to decipher the true meaning of what they hear.

By concluding my dissertation with a chapter placing Wright's last novel alongside Hitchcock's *Rope*, I hope to synthesize as well as elaborate upon several arguments that I have raised in previous chapters. In an effort to bookend my dissertation, I will discuss, here in Chapter Four as I did in Chapter One, the ways in which listening functions in the representation of generational conflict. All the while, I will expand my consideration of patriarchal relations, which I first analyze along familial lines, to include a discussion of the generational conflict between a former headmaster and his students, for these two forms of generational conflict, as represented in *A Father's Law* and *Rope* respectively, symbolize a greater institutional crisis during the postwar period. In

addition, I will demonstrate the ways in which listening often comes down to the ability to tune out the lies one hears so as to tune into the truth of what is said—for as Michel Chion cogently states in *Film, A Sound Art*, the verb *to hear* "is used to name all that enters via the ears and registers automatically on consciousness" while the verb *to listen* "involves the act of paying full attention to a part of what one hears" (286). Furthermore, listening, as opposed to hearing, involves a degree of interpretation and relates to matters of subjectivity. Hence, I will explore the ways in which a character's range of knowledge influences the interpretation of what is heard and how an awareness of the subtext enables superior listeners to recognize a truth from a lie. That is, I will discuss how range of knowledge allows one to read between the lines of the listening situation.

In this chapter, I am very much interested in investigating the trouble with listening, which is why I will analyze the ways in which a tone of humor complicates the listening situation; I will explore the risk of listening to, learning from and acting upon lessons delivered by misguided teachers, fathers or, more generally speaking, patriarchal authority figures; and I will investigate the act of listening with the intent of distorting or twisting what someone has said or misreading what has been heard. Lastly, I will discuss the difficulties in and consequences of listening to what one does not want to hear—that is, I will trace the ways in which Hitchcock and Wright trigger cognitive dissonance via the act of listening—for the most significant problem with listening, as depicted in *Rope* and *A Father's Law*, is the way in which it can disturb a conflicted conscience.

While arguing that *A Father's Law* is an adaptation of *Rope*, which after all is my main objective in this chapter, I do not want to overly conflate the work of Hitchcock and

Wright. Certainly there are significant differences between their two texts. The most striking example may be the degree of mystery surrounding the respective murders that serve as catalysts for each narrative. The identity of the murderer in *A Father's Law* remains unknown to the reader, while in *Rope*, the audience knows from the outset precisely who strangled David Kentley (Dick Hogan). Such a discrepancy impacts the reader's or audience's interpretation of the meaning behind what is said, which in turn leads the reader of *A Father's Law* to identify with the older father and encourages the filmgoer of *Rope* to identify with the younger student killers. Consequently, Hitchcock's film generates great suspense while Wright's novel produces more surprise.

Another notable difference between the novel and the film is the selective splintering and conflation of characters. At times, Ruddy Turner, the protagonist in Wright's novel, will resemble not only Rupert Cadell (James Stewart), the patriarchal figure in Hitchcock's film, but also David's father, Mr. Kentley (Sir Cedric Hardwicke); while at other times, the character played by Stewart in *Rope* will be represented in *A Father's Law* not only by Ruddy but also by his fellow police officer Ed Seigel. Moreover, Wright combines Hitchcock's Phillip (Farley Granger) and Brandon (John Dall) into one character—for Tommy experiences the guilt that Phillip demonstrates throughout *Rope* while also seeming to desire the recognition that tragically plagues Brandon.[xxxix] Yet, despite these differences, there are more than enough similarities between Hitchcock's film and Wright's final novel to warrant reading *A Father's Law* as a literary adaptation of *Rope*. More importantly for my argument, many of the threads

connecting the two texts revolve around the narrative use of sound and the trope of listening.

To commence, both Hitchcock and Wright employ acousmatic sound to open their respective narratives. Michel Chion designates the term *acousmatic* to describe a sound that is heard but whose cause, or source, is not seen: "We can never praise Pierre Schaeffer enough for having unearthed this arcane word in the 1950s. He adopted it to designate a mode of listening that is commonplace today, systematized in the use of radio, telephones, and phonograph recorder" (*The Voice in Cinema* 18). *Rope* begins with the acousmatic off-screen sound of David Kentley's scream as Phillip and Brandon strangle him to death. At first, the source of the sound is undisclosed, as the camera is located on the outside of the apartment, capturing high-angle images of a New York City streetscape. The film cuts to a shot inside the apartment, which reveals the scream to be resounding from David.[xl] What is significant about this initial use of sound is that the characters walking down the street below Brandon and Phillip's apartment do not hear it. The fact that one of these characters is a policeman renders the unheard scream even more significant considering the patriarchal crisis that constitutes one of the major motifs in Hitchcock's film.[xli] The cut provides the audience with the means of making sense of the sound—locating its source and showing the reason behind the scream—in ways that no other character, save the two murderers, can interpret it, which will allow Hitchcock to create dramatic irony and develop suspense along the lines of listening throughout the film.

Wright employs the acousmetre at the beginning of his narrative too but to different ends. *A Father's Law* opens with an onomatopoetic ringing sound. At first the source of the sound is associated, in Ruddy's mind, with a police whistle: "He saw the dim image of the traffic cop make a right face turn and fling out a white-gloved arm, signaling that the flow of cars from the east should stop and that those toward the south now had the right of way, and at the same instant he heard the cop's shrill whistle: Wrrrriiiiieee" (1). The sound of the whistle represents patriarchal law and the social order that Ruddy associates with it. Wright will repeat this use of onomatopoeia three more times before informing the reader that Ruddy is dreaming and the actual source of the sound is the telephone in his bedroom.[xlii] Rather than distancing us, the reader, from the perspective of the patriarch as it does from that of the police officer in *Rope*, the use of acousmatic sound in the opening pages of Wright's novel sutures us to the father's subjective position. Along with Ruddy, we misinterpret the source of the onomatopoetic sound as a police whistle when, in fact, it is a telephone, which will deliver the news of his promotion to Chief of Police. While Hitchcock employs acousmatic sound for the sake of suspense, Wright uses it for the sake of surprise.

Of course, Wright and Hitchcock's narrative use of sound exceeds these acousmatic openings. In the pages immediately following Ruddy's dream, Wright foreshadows the theme of a strained relationship between a father and son, doing so along the lines of listening. After the phone call from police headquarters initially rouses Ruddy from bed in the middle of the night, Tommy enters his parent's bedroom: "'I heard the phone and heard you talking'" (5). As I have already mentioned, what had been the

acousmatic sound of the traffic whistle in Ruddy's dream becomes that of the phone ringing, which serves the secondary purpose of cueing Tommy's entrance into his parents' bedroom. As soon as his son has left the bedroom, Ruddy talks with his wife about the disconnect between Tommy and him: "'I wish I knew what was going on in that boy'" (5). As I will argue, gaining such knowledge will test Ruddy's ability to listen. Such desire to listen places Ruddy in line with the likes of Borris Max from *Native Son*, but unlike Wright's earlier character, the act of listening will leave Ruddy distraught, which I will discuss in greater detail below.

For now, I am interested in analyzing Wright's narrative use of sound to represent the major conflict in his last novel. From the outset of *A Father's Law*, Wright paints Tommy as being terribly engaged in his studies, and the author includes the incessant sound of Tommy's typewriter to represent the son's academic interests. The iterative sound of the typewriter will come to symbolize the difference between Tommy and his father. More importantly for my argument, listening to such sounds will exacerbate Ruddy's mounting concern for his son.

In these opening scenes, Wright indicates the subjectivity behind the act of listening. Moments prior to Tommy entering their bedroom, Ruddy had asked his wife, Agnes, if she hears it. When she replies by asking him to be more specific, Ruddy exclaims: "'That noise? Jesus…Tommy's typing. And at this hour. Doesn't he ever sleep?'" (4). Agnes states, simply, that Tommy enrolled in a local university and is studying for exams, at which point Ruddy snaps: "'Goddammit, he's overdoing it. A boy his age ought to be sleeping'" (4). Ruddy continues to think about his son while in the

bathroom, "testing the temperature of the [shower] water with his hand until it was right, hearing all the while the sharp tapping of his son's typewriter […] 'What's wrong with that boy?' he asks himself out loud" (6). The sound of Tommy's typewriter represents Ruddy's estranged relationship with his son and engenders the father's disconcerted state of mind. Moreover, the difference between Agnes' measured reaction to what she hears and the way in which Ruddy interprets what he hears indicates the subjective nature of listening.

The subjective ear applies to Ruddy's interpretation of his conversations with Tommy as well. "For example, that way in which [Tommy] said: 'Oh, I'm all right,'" when Ruddy had asked his son how he was doing. "It had a strange ring; it had reminded Ruddy of some of the queer characters he had had to handle at the city jail" (6).[xliii] Soon, the father seems to recognize the subjective aspect of listening, "realizing that his condemnation of his son was far severer than any objective evidence warranted" (6). Wright is depicting the challenge to listening presented by matters of subjectivity that will resurface throughout the novel. The fear and worry that the sound of his son's typewriter triggers in the father and the way in which the latter interprets conversations with the former lead Ruddy to ponder his relationship with Tommy. After all, he "was intelligent enough to realize that there was something in him that was clouding his vision of his son, and that no matter how hard he had tried, he had never been able to erect the kind of healthy father-and-son relationship he had always dreamed of and wanted" (6). Wright concludes this passage by having Ruddy ask the question that motivates my analysis of *A Father's Law*: "'[W]hy doesn't he tell me everything?'" (7). The question,

though, that Ruddy should ask himself, if and when Tommy does talk to his father, would Ruddy listen and, if so, what would be the consequences?

Ruddy's ability to listen to his son will be tested by the time Wright concludes his opening chapter. Moreover, the slightest attempt to listen will continue to engender a state of cognitive dissonance in the father, inverting the structure of Hitchcock's narrative.[xliv] Indeed, the "something in him that was clouding his vision of his son" distorts any conversations Ruddy has with Tommy, indicating the impact that subjectivity and, as I will discuss below, range of knowledge has on the process of listening. For such trouble with listening is paramount particularly when father and son discuss matters of academia and law enforcement. In the beginning of the novel, Ruddy asks Tommy if he likes school: "'Oh, yeah. It's all about this south Side of Chicago.' Tommy seemed suddenly effusive, open. Class stratification, poverty, color consciousness, family disorganization…'" (10).[xlv] As the conversation turns to Ruddy's police work, Tommy asks his father about a recent execution. Once Ruddy has a chance to recall the case, his son asks if he remembers what Tommy had predicted about the man: "Ruddy frowned. Somehow, for a reason he could not express, he resented Tommy's keen interest in crime. 'Can't say I do, son'" (11). The act of listening is closely wed to the ability to remember what one has heard and memory constructs one's subjectivity. As I will argue below, in *Rope*, Rupert Cadell will be able to listen to Phillip, unlike any other dinner guest, precisely because he can remember an anecdote that undermines Phillip's claims. Listening, as opposed to merely hearing, often involves a comparison of what one hears with what one has experienced in the past.

Returning to *A Father's Law* and to the ways in which the inability to remember impairs one's ability to listen, Tommy reminds his dad that he had predicted Thompson would not confess. When Ruddy claims that he now remembers what his son had said and states that Thompson, in fact, never did confess, Tommy attempts to tell his father that Thompson did not commit the crime of which he was accused. But Ruddy dismisses his son: "'Oh, hell, Tommy. There you go. You're putting yourself against the police and the courts'" (12). Ruddy interprets Tommy's claim as an attempt to challenge his profession and the judicial system—such a perceived threat clouds his vision and plugs his ears, if you will. Tommy interjects, trying to persuade his father by arguing that guilty men, like Thompson, on death row usually confess to the crime. Tommy asks repeatedly if his dad knows why Thompson did not confess, but his father becomes increasingly incredulous: "'What are you talking about? You just said that you felt he wasn't guilty; if that's the case, then what could he confess?'" (12). Again, Ruddy desires a more intimate relationship with Tommy, which requires him to listen to his son but doing so would threaten his worldview. In this sense, listening and fostering his relationship with Tommy means denying the impulse to tune out that which Ruddy does not want to hear.

Furthermore, the father's unwillingness, at this point in the novel, to listen to his son is an allegory for the police department's refusal to acknowledge testimony concerning the Thompson case. As he will throughout the novel, Ruddy conflates his role as father with his role as Chief of Police, which points to similarities in the dynamics of listening across patriarchal systems. Tommy appeals to be heard by his father, just as Thompson wants the police to listen: "'The guy wasn't guilty. I'm convinced of that. The

police didn't believe his alibi, but I did.' Tommy sat now, and words poured out, passionate words that held Ruddy spellbound. 'That woman told the truth. Of course, she was a drunkard. That's what made the police reject her story.'" Notice how the particulars of a situation impact one's willingness to listen. "'Thompson was never near that place,' Tommy continues. 'Now, Dad, when you got a guy in jail—a guy like Thompson, illiterate and scared—and sentence him to the electric chair, he gets to feel guilty. And Thompson would have confessed to that crime, but he simply didn't know to do so'" (12). Despite the cognitive dissonance that Tommy's speech will engender, at first Ruddy is captivated by what he hears. He wants to listen, but he is conflicted. The father is metonymically linked to the police, who listen neither to Thompson's alibi nor to the woman's testimony, so perhaps not surprisingly, "Ruddy rejected [Tommy's] theory with heat" (12). We learn from Tommy that Thompson, while on death row, "'tried to confess to some minor jobs in hope of getting the death sentence commuted. You said that the police rejected those confessions. I don't think he was lying. *And if he had really done that murder job, he would have spit it all out*'" (13). As it will in *Rope*, listening, in this scene, implies the ability to decipher lies from the truth. The police must be able to determine the veracity of Thompson's confession just as Ruddy will need to determine if Tommy is genuinely confessing to murder by novel's end.

Before I conclude my analysis of the narrative use of sound in Chapter One of *A Father's Law*, let me move to a scene later in the novel in which Ruddy again conflates his role as a father with his job as a police officer. When he first approaches Tommy about a girl his son was to marry only to have the relationship end abruptly, the father

references his profession: "'Tommy, I'm waiting for you to tell me what happened'" (85). Tommy replies obstinately: "'Talking about it isn't going to help!'" but Ruddy rebuts: "'Let me decide that'" (85). When Tommy continues to resist, his father warns him: "'I'm an officer […] I could find out'" (85). The father's method of interrogation engenders fear in his son, but Ruddy is confident in his skills as a detective and a father: "Ruddy felt that he was near his quarry. The detective in him urged him not to let up; his feelings as a father spurred him on. It'll be for his own good if he tells me, he told himself" (85). Ruddy's internal thoughts point to the potential therapeutic role of listening that Britten pitches to Bigger in a guileful attempt to coerce a confession in *Native Son*.

But, despite his many shortcomings, Ruddy seems to be less the Britten type and more akin to Borris Max. Ruddy tries to console his son: "'You can say anything to me, Tommy […] Cry a bit. But tell me,' Ruddy insisted" (86). As I argue above, Tommy cannot simply tell his father anything for there is much to which Ruddy refuses to listen. Aware of their history, Tommy remains intransigent: "'Leave me alone,' Tommy begged, speaking, it seemed, more to himself than to his father" (86). At the end of *Native Son*, Wright's protagonist seems to be talking to himself, speaking words to which he, too, must listen. While it is unclear the degree to which Bigger can understand his own existential thoughts, Tommy is highly educated and presumably better equipped to register the significance of his own words. Unfortunately, Wright does not develop this theme in *A Father's Law*. Perhaps he would have in subsequent revisions. Nevertheless, Ruddy insists on helping his son, implying that the act of listening can function as the

final act in the process of confession: "'Give me your burden, son,' Ruddy pleaded quietly, compassionately. 'I can understand. Trust me. You're too much alone'" (86). Wright employs the act of listening as a means of establishing confidence. Furthermore, listening functions not only as a means of transferring a burden from son to father but also as a means of understanding, as a method of establishing trust and, finally, as a means of combating a sense of alienation. Tommy says he would rather be alone, but his father insists: "'I won't stop until you talk to me,' Ruddy said, squeezing his arm about his son's shoulder" (86). Again, the line between the role of the father and that of the law officer is blurred: "Experience had taught him that this personal, physical touching was a good art in extracting a confession. It helped to divert the resistance of the over-burdened heart. 'Talk, Tommy'" (86). For a moment, "Tommy could not speak, for his throat was racked with sobs as he gasped for breath. Ruddy waited, holding him, knowing that he had won but feeling somehow fearful of his victory" (86). Ruddy's prize is Tommy's confession regarding the reason for the breakup with Marie, the woman he had planned on marrying until he learned that she had congenital syphilis. It will remain unclear as to the therapeutic effect engendered in Tommy by his confession; however, what Ruddy hears immediately impacts the father: "Never had Ruddy felt more deeply protective toward his son than now. To realize that Tommy had gone through that whole stormy, period alone, saying not one word! He should have told me!" (93). The last exclamation has become a mantra for Ruddy, but something has changed in Wright's protagonist, for Ruddy asks: "Yet what good could he have done?" (93). Ruddy had demanded that Tommy confess so as to relieve his son's burden, but along with the reader, the father

comes to realize the limits of listening. Now, let me return to Ruddy's conversation with Tommy in the first chapter of Wright's novel in order to show how the author establishes a similar sense of cognitive dissonance in his protagonist from the outset.

Again, Ruddy tries to listen. He wants to understand his son, but his response indicates the difficulty in doing so: "'Tommy, I don't know. I don't follow you, son,' Ruddy mumbled, scratching his head. This is what he did not like. This son of his holding forth about the vital heart of his police work and with undaunted authority" (13). Some fathers would interpret a son's interest in his line of work as an opportunity to foster a closer relationship, but not Ruddy. Such talk impels him to silence his son: "This is what had made him demand of Tommy that he never talk like this before his fellow officers, who sometimes came to the apartment" (13). Tommy's speech is a threat to the father, and such censorship is an instinctive reaction by Ruddy when forced to listen to things he does not want to hear.

Part of the trouble with listening in *A Father's Law*, as in *Rope*, is the possibility that it can destabilize one's sense-of-self. To accentuate this point, Wright concludes his first chapter by returning to the disconcerting sound of Tommy's typewriter: "As Ruddy went down the stairway [after their conversation about the Thompson case], and even when he was upon the rain-wet front steps, he could hear the diminishing whir of Tommy's typewriter keys" (14). The sound of the typewriter, as registered in the ear of the father, has come to represent the chasm between he and Tommy. Furthermore, the act of listening functions, as it does at the end of Hitchcock's *Rope*, as a means by which Wright engenders Ruddy's internal conflict: "'Goddamn, if that boy's right, then I'm

crazy,' he muttered half-aloud to himself. A man wanting to confess to a crime that he did not commit just because he is in jail and is ignorant, 'Goddamn,' he railed at himself and at his strange son. 'I wish to hell he wouldn't talk like that'" (14). The opening chapter of *A Father's Law* foreshadows the ways in which listening will function throughout the novel as a means of engendering cognitive dissonance in the mind of a father, not to mention a chief of police. By the end of this opening chapter, Wright has clearly established the trouble with listening. He has developed a paradox that will run through the novel: Ruddy needs to listen to Tommy in order to foster a more intimate relationship with his son, but doing so will threaten his worldview, his livelihood and his patriarchal authority.

As I said above, Wright inverted the structure of Hitchcock's film—for it is at the end of *Rope* in which we encounter a disillusioned patriarch in a state of crisis not altogether unlike Ruddy in the opening chapter of *A Father's Law*. After Rupert opens the cassone and discovers David Kentley's dead body, he expresses the underlying conflict of Hitchcock's narrative: "Oh no, no. I couldn't believe it was true" (1:14:41). As Brandon pleads, "Rupert, please…listen to me. Just listen. Let me explain," Rupert replies in horror: "Explain? You think you can explain *that*." Brandon argues that Rupert has the ability to understand, metaphorically linking the act of listening with the ability to comprehend, when he responds: "Yes, to you I can, because you'll understand." Rupert seems appalled at the suggestion, indicating the degree of cognitive dissonance that this dialogue and the evening's events have engendered. Brandon mentions the conversation earlier in the evening with Mr. Kentley regarding Nietzsche's theory of the Superman:

"Remember, we said the lives of inferior beings are unimportant. Remember we said…we've always said, you and I, that moral concepts of good and evil, and right and wrong don't hold for the intellectually superior" (1:15:16). As Brandon pleads his case, the camera pans to focus exclusively on Rupert and his reaction to Brandon's attempt at rationalizing the murder. By shifting the frame, away from Brandon *and* Rupert, to focus exclusively on the former headmaster, Hitchcock emphasizes the impact on Rupert of listening to his own lecture echoed back at him. Elisabeth Weis notes a significant distinction between the theater and cinema that applies to this scene in *Rope*: "The difference is that in a play it is nearly impossible to establish point of view if there is more than one character onstage, whereas on film Hitchcock can, and does, connect sounds with the perceptions of a given character at a given time" (131). In this case, Hitchcock utilizes the camera frame in order to establish the point-of-audition, which is defined so as to stress the impact of that to which Rupert must listen.

Figure 29

Brandon's plea for Rupert to recall the dinner conversation is echoed in the beginning of *A Father's Law* when Tommy asks Ruddy to recollect his prediction regarding the Thompson case, which I have discussed in detail above. Like Wright, Hitchcock depicts the relationship between memory and listening. After Rupert admits that he remembers the discussion of Nietzsche's theory—not only on this evening but on the many nights during which "Brandon would sit till all hours at the Master's feet" (0:23:14) as Kenneth explains to Janet in an earlier scene—Brandon continues to plead his case: "Well, that's all we've done. That's all Phillip and I have done. He and I have

lived what you and I have talked" (1:15:32). Theodore Price points out, in part, the significance of Brandon's declaration:

> The truth about *Rope* is that it starts off with a violent, ecstatic homosexual sex act. The scream that we hear, behind the curtain, is that of orgiastic sexual climax from the homosexual "victim."
>
> The *overt* meaning of the film is that John Dall is saying to his artist-mentor, "You keep on constructing make-believe murders and saying that they are adventurous and fun. Why don't you have the nerve really to commit one, and really have fun?"
>
> The *covert* meaning of the film ("thinly disguised," so to speak) is that John Dall is saying to Jimmy Stewart, or that one side of the artist's personality is saying to the other side, "You keep suspecting that a homosexual affair would be fun. Why don't you have nerve enough to engage in one?"
>
> From one aspect, the youngish John Dall is trying to seduce the oldish, graying Jimmy Stewart. Symbolically, the murder is not the murder of a third young man but the (continual) sex act between John Dall and Farley Granger. This, then, is the true meaning of Dall's declaration to Stewart: "Phillip and I have done, what you and I have talked." (31-32)

The coded references to homosexuality in *Rope* inform our reading of Ed's theory in *A Father's Law* concerning Tommy's ulterior motive for involving himself in the Brentwood Park murders. Only moments before Ed suggests that Tommy is "being spurred by something else," he offers the possibility "of a homosexual link up" in regards

to the case (264). Ruddy immediately rejects Ed's theory; but Price's analysis of *Rope* indicates the complexities of listening for overt and covert meaning, making me wary of dismissing out of hand Wright's insertion of a homosexual theme in *A Father's Law*. Regardless, I am less concerned here with themes of sexuality and more interested in the impact of Brandon's charge on Rupert's psyche.

Like *A Father's Law*, *Rope* represents the trouble with listening to what one does not want to hear. As Brandon steps back into the frame, saying "I knew you would understand because you have to, don't you see, you have to," Rupert walks away from his former student and sits in a chair, assuming a lower position in the composition of the shot relative to Brandon—rarely has Rupert appeared "beneath" the other characters. He acknowledges the impact of what he has heard and suggests a degree of complicity in the murders not unlike the responsibility that Ruddy seems to assume at the end of *A Father's Law*. After reaching the conclusion, at the end of the novel, that Tommy had been involved in the Brentwood murder case all along, Ruddy acknowledges his role in the situation:

Figure 30

> Now that Tommy had pretended to have taken part in the holdup, and now that it was circumstantially proved that he had been at the site where the murder gun had been hidden, Ruddy was emotionally inclined to believe that maybe many other things had happened, that the worst could be true. 'What have I done wrong?' he moaned to himself, sitting again and lowering his head into his hands. (264)

Ruddy's sense of responsibility leads him to lie to Ed: "Oh, hell, why couldn't he trust Ed and tell him the truth. Yet he knew that it was hopeless to try. He now understood why Tommy had not been able to tell him. Yes, by God, he would see this through and resign" (265). Similarly, Rupert will find himself responsible, if not complicit, in Phillip and Brandon's crime: "Brandon, till this very moment, this world and the people in it have always been dark and incomprehensible to me, and I've tried to clear my way with logic and superior intellect, and you've thrown my own words right back in my face, Brandon" (1:16:10). Rupert's reaction points to the trouble with listening that runs thematically throughout Hitchcock's film, for the former headmaster experiences an internal conflict when he hears his own words spoken right back in his ear.

Furthermore, this scene in *Rope* speaks to the way in which listening is far from a passive act, for it functions dynamically, here, as a means of appropriating the words of another. Rupert seems to acknowledge Brandon's "right" to construe his teacher's lessons and throw them back in his former headmaster's face: "If nothing else, a man should stand by his words, but you've given my words a meaning that I never dreamed of, and you've tried to twist them into a cold, logical excuse for your ugly murder. Well, they never were that Brandon" (1:16:35). There seems to be an agency in Brandon as a listening subject that horrifies Rupert.[xlvi] Does Brandon misread Rupert's teachings? Is he a flawed or a superior listener? As I will argue, the answers to such questions make all the difference when it comes to our reading of Hitchcock's film.

While John Russell Taylor considers the Nietzschean talk half-baked,[xlvii] Hitchcock's incorporation of the theory is worthy of more serious consideration. Jacob

Golomb's analysis of Nietzsche's theory of the Superman could serve as a defense for Brandon: "Nietzsche held the view that a philosophy that cannot be existentially lived or experimented with is empty and redundant. Thus, if the free spirit par excellence cannot become a social 'is,' what is the point in presenting it as a moral 'ought'." At the same time, Golomb goes on to present what could serve as an indictment not only of Nietzsche but also of Rupert: "Does it make any sense to entice somebody to attain a goal that, by definition, is utterly unachievable? Thus, one has to speculate about Nietzsche's reasons for introducing such an ideal in the first place, an ideal that he himself thought to be existentially impractical" (22). Indeed, the filmgoer has to speculate about Rupert's assumption that his former students would not act upon a theory to which he introduced them. If a good student need listen to his or her teacher, then Phillip and Brandon are nothing but exemplar pupils. So, why is Rupert stunned by Brandon and Phillip's actions? Did he think that his teachings would have no influence or impact on them?

Thus, we should question Rupert when he rises from the chair with a gun in his hand and admonishes Brandon for listening to him to the point where the student would act out a theory espoused by his teacher. He wants to deny the listener agency, arguing that Brandon "can't make" his words a cold, logical justification for murder: "There must have been something deep inside you from the very start that let you do this thing, but there's always been something deep inside me that would never let me do it, and would never let me be a party to it now." The film seems to suggest a danger in listening when enacted by a flawed character—at least that is what Rupert would have us believe. Like

Wright ten years later, Hitchcock encourages us to contemplate the subjective nature of listening.

More importantly for my argument, Rupert explains how Brandon's speech impacts him, all the while describing, indirectly, another function of listening. When Brandon asks what he means, Rupert replies: "I mean tonight you've made me ashamed of every concept I ever had of superior or inferior beings, but I thank you for that shame because now I know that we're each of us a separate human being, Brandon…" The camera, along with Rupert, turns on Brandon, as the former teacher continues to lecture: "…with the right to live and to work and to think as individuals but with an obligation to the society we live in." At this point, the camera has tracked and panned 180-degrees so that Brandon now faces the camera, having never moved himself. As he has throughout the film, Hitchcock employs the camera in order to depict the response of a listening subject: "By what right do you dare say that there's a superior few to which you belong?" (1:17:21). With the camera repositioned so, the film focuses on Brandon's reaction to Rupert's interrogation. We may feel sorry for him; after all, it was Rupert's own words that, earlier in the evening, conferred such a right upon Brandon, which I will discuss in detail below. At least, that is what John Dall's countenance seems to communicate to this filmgoer as Rupert continues his self-righteous tirade: "By what right did you decide that that boy in there was inferior and therefore could be killed?" (1:17:30). We could apply Weis's comment concerning *Dial M for Murder* to my

Figure 31 & 32

analysis of this scene in *Rope*: "It would seem that when Hitchcock is using techniques that make us most identify with his victim, he uses the depth axis—reaching into the audience or forcing us to listen with a character to what is happening beyond the door" (132). Beyond the door, as it concerns this scene in *Rope*, meaning beneath the text (or should I say in the cassone?), which is why, at the end of this chapter, I will provide a close reading of the dinner conversation that informs our reading of Rupert's final lecture here at the conclusion of the film.

In the end, *Rope* is a condemnation of Nietzsche's theory of the Superman. It delegitimizes the concept of superior minds and restores social order. As Rupert makes his first move toward the window, Brandon asks what he's doing: "It's not what I'm going to do, Brandon, it's what society's going to do. I don't know what that'll be but I can guess, and I can help. You're going to die, Brandon." (1:18:05). Rupert turns and, for the first time in this scene, refers to Phillip, who has remained in the background slumped over the piano, as an accomplice to murder: "Both of you. You're going to die." With Brandon in the foreground of the shot, we see Phillip, in the background, rise from the piano. The camera tracks past Brandon, following Rupert as he walks to the window, opens it and fires three shots. We hear the ambient sound of car horns out on the street, followed by footsteps running on the sidewalk: "Rising voices from passersby on the street below indicate that the police will be called, and soon we hear the wail of a siren, which eventually crescendos to a deafening intensity. The importance of these sounds to Hitchcock's meaning is indicated by the painstaking efforts he made to obtain the effects" (Weis 130).

Indeed, the painstaking means of production for *Rope* indicates the importance of sound and, as I argue, listening as narrative devices for Hitchcock. "What is truly remarkable," as Francois Truffaut claims in his renowned book-length interview with the director, **"**is that all of this [re-arranging of the set to accommodate for the mobile camera] was done so silently that you were able to make a direct sound track. For a European, particularly if he were in Rome or Paris, that's almost inconceivable." Hitchcock reminds Trouffaut that they had

> never done it in Hollywood either! To do it, we had a special floor made. The opening scene, you will recall, shows two young fellows strangling a man and putting his body into a chest. There was some dialogue. Then there is more dialogue as they go into the dining room and then to the kitchen. Walls are being moved and lights are being raised and lowered. I was so scared that something would go wrong that I couldn't even look during the first take. For eight minutes of consecutive shooting everything went very smoothly. Then the camera panned around as the two killers walked back toward the chest, and there, right in camera focus, was an electrician standing by the window! So the first take was ruined. (184)

More importantly for my argument, Weis goes on to note the significance of the diegetic sound reverberating from outside the apartment:

> After an initial moment of traffic noise inserted when the murderers first open their curtains, there is no more sound from the street until the end of the film,[xlviii] when an approaching police siren foretells the doom of the two murderers who

> have been hiding a corpse in their apartment. With the final intrusion of outside noise the apartment that has shielded their crime suddenly becomes their trap. The shift to outside noise signals a shift from subjectivity to external reality:[xlix] the restriction during most of the film to sounds within the apartment matches the murderers' sense of insularity, the occasional door bells and telephone rings signal the major threats to their security,[l] and the final wail of a siren brings them into the larger world of retribution. (130)

Weis's analysis addresses the matter of subjectivity related to the act of listening. Despite Rupert's best efforts up until now to exculpate himself from the actions of Brandon and Phillip, I read this final scene as a moment in which the culpability for David's death is transferred, in part at least, to Rupert. In other words, the sounds signal the major threat to Rupert's security, at least as it pertains to his sense-of-self. In the final moments of the film, the camera tracks back from Rupert and settles into a long shot of the apartment room. With a look of indifference on his face, Brandon adjusts the tie on his collar (or has it become a noose?) and proceeds to pour himself a drink. Rupert, with a defeated look, walks toward the cassone, which has re-entered the frame, and sits in a chair by its side. All the while, the sound of sirens joins the throng of voices from out on the street, penetrating the otherwise silent apartment. The narrative use of sound here functions as a reminder, or a realization to Rupert, that social order rules despite any Nietzschean theories to the contrary. Such a reminder is not altogether unlike Samuel Johnson's kicking of the rock to counter Lord Berkeley's idealistic theories about material objects having no external reality.[li]

By blocking Rupert so that his back is to the camera, Hitchcock makes it difficult, if not impossible, to read Rupert's reaction to the sirens at the end of the film, which points to the importance of the face when representing the act of listening in cinematic terms. So it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine with any certainty whether Rupert feels responsible, again if only in part, for the actions of his former students; but if nothing else, he has abdicated his sense of moral authority. As Kristin L. Matthews argues, "Hitchcock undercuts his experimental film's edgy tenor and retreats into convention, disrupting the unity of the film and producing both cognitive and political dissonance" (752-753). Rupert's philosophical worldview has been shattered by what he has seen—David's dead body—and by what he has had to listen to—his own words echoed back to him in defense of the heinous crime.

The cognitive dissonance, the shared sense of guilt and the transference of moral authority that I posit in my analysis of the final scene of *Rope* is rendered via the narrative use of sound not unlike that which Wright employs to represent a transference of power and authority in the conclusion of his novel. Moreover, the act of listening is represented via the trope of literacy, which in turn, Wright employs, like Hitchcock, to distinguish superior from inferior minds. After reading the newspaper headline indicating that Tommy had confessed to the Brentwood Park murders, Ed "turned as though to walk out of the room, then whirled and came back to the desk, but his eyes were sightless" (268). After establishing a sense of blindness,[lii] Wright goes on to emphasize the soundscape in the room: "The office was filled only with the soft, faint sound of the huge, electric clock on the wall and the breathing of the three men" (268). Akin to the trouble

with representing the act of listening in film at the end of *Rope*, it is not clear how Ed and Ruddy interpret the dearth of sound in the office for the narration does not provide the reader with any explication. Does Ruddy interpret the sound of the "huge, electric clock" as symbolic of the fact that, by novel's end, he has run out of time? What is certain, however, is the unspoken transference of power from Ruddy to Ed: "As though by telepathy, Ed would not meet Ruddy's eyes and Ruddy would not meet Ed's. A decision was being made and tension and anxiousness made the three men silent; it was in this long moment that the scepter of moral leadership in the office of the Chief of Police passed from Ruddy to his friend Ed; it passed without a word, without a gesture" (268). Ed, who is positioned outside of Ruddy's immediate family, represents the external social order. Hence, the transference of power from Ruddy to him at the end of *A Father's Law* echoes the transference of moral authority from Rupert, the individual, to society as a whole at the end of *Rope*. After all, as the former headmaster tells his students in the final scene, it is not "what I'm going to do…but what society's going to do."

In an attempt to further the connection between Hitchcock's film and Wright's novel, I would like to suggest that like *Rope*, which Kristin L. Matthews calls a Cold War film very much concerned with matters of reading, *A Father's Law* is a postwar narrative similarly concerned with matters of literacy. Furthermore, the act of reading that Matthews discusses, and that of listening about which I write, comes down to more entrenched philosophical notions of superior and inferior minds. As Matthews points out:

> Brandon repeatedly exclaims that the party's "excitement" will be watching to see if anyone will "suspect," read the signs correctly and identify the party's subtext.

> While Brandon wishes to erase David's "character," he simultaneously wants his feats as a "superman" to be read, feared and respected. In this light, the party is both a text to be read and an examination testing whom is a "good" reader. (745)

Matthews goes on to argue that the suspense invoked by the clues dispersed throughout the dinner party scenes "trains the reader to look for other signs of or from David and to analyze what sort of readers the party guests are" (747). In addition to *looking* for such signs, I argue, the characters must listen, for a "good" listener, in many ways, makes a good "reader."

Perhaps the best example of the ways in which listening functions in *Rope* as a metaphor for reading is the scene about the chicken-strangling incident, which also depicts the relationship between "reading" a situation and one's respective range of knowledge. As the dinner party commences, Janet asks Phillip why he doesn't eat chicken. At first, he simply says, "I just don't," but she persists: "There must be a reason. Freud says there's a reason for everything, even me" (0:33:36).[liii] Rupert positions himself in the middle ground of the frame, screen-left, over Phillip's right shoulder. He looks directly at Phillip and Janet who are in the foreground of the shot, indicating that he is eavesdropping on their conversation. Then Rupert's eyeline shifts in the direction of the cassone. Since our range of knowledge concerning the contents of the cassone exceeds Rupert's, we are left in suspense to wonder if he is interpreting what he hears the way we do. Like Phillip, we wait in anticipation to find out if Rupert will manage to decipher the significance of the chicken-strangling anecdote in reference to what has

Figure 33

happened in the apartment only moments prior to the dinner guests arriving at the party. Hence, the level of suspense is constructed around Rupert's ability or inability to read the subtext of the situation and our ability to discern if and when he does. As Phillip insists to Janet that there is no reason for his refusal to eat chicken, he proceeds to walk away from her, and the camera, to join the other dinner guests on the couch in the background of the shot, at which point a rack focus draws our attention to Rupert as he refuses to let Phillip off the hook. Like Ruddy, Rupert must listen so as to read the situation correctly, which depends greatly on his range of knowledge: "Well, as I remember, Phillip, you have a very funny reason" (0:33:40). Rupert demonstrates not only his penchant to eavesdrop on other conversations at the dinner party but also his ability to remember what Phillip has said in the past. As Hitchcock and Wright demonstrate in their respective narratives, the ability to listen, i.e., to read a situation correctly, depends greatly on one's range of knowledge.

Rupert's range of knowledge concerning Phillip's history with chickens exceeds ours. As a result, he knows that Phillip is lying while we are surprised to learn of Phillip's disingenuousness. Throughout the film, we are unhinged from Rupert's perspective as a result of a greater range of knowledge concerning the murder of David Kentley, hence we wait in suspense to find out if he will be able to read the situation; but in the case of the chicken strangling anecdote, it is Rupert who has a greater range of knowledge than us, the audience. Having said that, while the audience may not know that Phillip is lying in the restricted sense of the chicken-strangling incident until Rupert informs us, we do know why he would be inclined to do so—Rupert does not. Thus, the suspense builds

again as the audience continues to wonder if Rupert will be able to discern the reason behind Phillip's obfuscation. The relatively privileged range of knowledge shifts in this scene from audience to Rupert and back to audience, which inherently influences the process of listening and reading both diegetically for Rupert and non-diegetically for filmgoers.

The exchange regarding Phillip's reason for declining to eat chicken, on this of all nights, aligns Rupert with Brandon, who like the former headmaster, has a broader range of knowledge—in this restricted sense at least—than Janet and the audience. In order to establish the special relationship between one and the other, Hitchcock has Rupert ask Brandon to explain Phillip's "funny reason" behind his aversion to chicken. Brandon tries to diffuse the situation by claiming that "it's nothing too much," after all, he is privy to the anecdote regarding chicken strangling to which Rupert refers as well as the reason why Phillip would want to avoid any recollection of it on this particular evening. In this sense, Brandon has the greatest range of knowledge, greater than the audience and Rupert's combined, which would make him the superior listening subject at this point in the film.

Janet insists on hearing the explanation behind Phillip's refusal to eat chicken, as does Rupert, who thinks it is rather fascinating. So Brandon proceeds to tell a story of the time he and Phillip visited his mother's farm in Connecticut when Phillip tried to wring the necks of two-or-three chickens. As Brandon recalls, it was a task that Phillip usually performed rather competently but, on "this particular morning, his touch was perhaps a trifle too delicate because one of his subjects for our dinner table suddenly rebelled. Like

Lazarus, he rose…" (0:34:22). As Brandon is telling this story, the camera pans from him to Phillip, who interjects: "That's a lie." Phillip cannot tolerate listening to Brandon's tale, having strangled his collegiate friend less than an hour before and perhaps scared that he will rise, metaphorically if not literally, to expose the truth. As Matthews notes while discussing the earlier scene of Mrs. Atwater's arrival at the party when she mistakes Kenneth for her nephew: "[I]t seems as if David has escaped from the unlocked chest to indict his murderers" (746). Hitchcock exploits Phillip's sense of guilt in order to maximize the use of double entendres in his film—our readings of which depend, of course, on a relative range of knowledge.

The chicken-strangling anecdote continues to demonstrate the role that range of knowledge plays in the process of listening. For instance, it enables a reader to recognize the subtext that informs one's interpretation of what has been heard. After accusing Brandon of lying, Phillip looks directly at him, and then the film cuts to Rupert, who tilts his head up and off-screen right in the direction of Brandon and Phillip. It is significant that this is one of the few unmasked cuts in a film renowned for its seamless editing.[liv] As I have argued, Hitchcock's tendency to focus less on showing the images of talking heads exemplifies his concern with representing, visually, listening subjects.

Figure 34

Just as Wright's novel will hinge on Ruddy's ability to interpret the meaning of his son's confessions, Hitchcock's film revolves around Rupert's ability to decipher what he hears, which is why the editing emphasizes the act of listening. The camera remains

on Rupert as Phillip continues to protest: "There isn't a word of truth in that whole story. I never strangled a chicken in my life […] I never strangled a chicken and you know it" (0:34:28-0:34:33). Off-screen, a woman's laugh, presumably Janet's, registers on the soundtrack: "Forgive me, but it just seems very funny you being so intense about an old dead chicken."[lv] Janet's comment reminds the audience of what it already knows and begs the question: what about Rupert? Can he listen? As Brandon apologizes and tries to diffuse the situation, Rupert's eyes shift from his right to his left, refocusing his gaze presumably from Phillip onto Brandon who is trying to end the conversation. Hitchcock has employed the gaze[lvi] repeatedly to represent the act of listening, particularly as it functions as a metaphor for reading a given situation.

A la Hitchcock, Wright demonstrates in *A Father's Law* the ways in which listening functions as a trope for reading, and he exploits the impact that range of knowledge has on one's ability to do either. Toward the end of the novel, after a gang has robbed a convenient store, Tommy claims to have taken part in the crime. It is crucial that Ed be involved in interrogating Tommy considering his theory regarding the guilty conscience and false confessions that he espoused earlier in the novel. While informing his boss of Tommy's recent confession, "Ed's voice died, and when he resumed speaking, his tone indicated that he was thinking intensely, weighing many factors and probabilities […] 'I'm not trying to sound partial to you, but if I know anything about police work, there's something goddamn fishy about this holdup'" (232). Ed demonstrates his ability to listen and therefore read the situation. He and Ruddy must not only solve the convenience store holdup case but also determine the veracity of Tommy's

confession. When Tommy claims to have participated in the convenience store heist, Ed accuses him of lying. When Ruddy's son insists that he's telling the truth, "Ed laughed suddenly and sat down beside Tommy and then placed his right palm tenderly on Tommy's knee—a knee that shook" (235). As I have argued, the act of listening does not involve hearing exclusively. In this case, the tactile perception of Tommy's nervous knee informs Ed's reading of the situation. Of course, Ed's ability to listen for the lie depends not only on a shaky knee but also on his superior range of knowledge here, which Wright depicts by having Ed inform Tommy that stickups do not happen the way the young man had described it.

At this point, Ed and Ruddy may be considered superior listeners for knowing what not to accept as true, but the situation is more complicated: "The office was so silent that the hard sound of Tommy's breathing could be heard" (235). The use of the passive voice begs the question: heard by whom? Do both Ed and Ruddy hear it? If so, do they interpret it along the same lines? Tommy asks Ed how he knows that the former is not telling the truth, and "[i]n the silence that followed, a soft wind of relaxation blew through the office" (235). As I discuss in Chapter Three above, there is reason to believe that Wright's narrator in *Native Son* interprets situations on a level apart from Bigger. It remains unclear, here in *A Father's Law*, whether Ed and Ruddy listen to the sound of Tommy's breathing or the wind in the same manner as the narrator; but the insinuation is that Ruddy's ear is tuned to that of the narrator, since his emotional state shifts in these moments from fear that Tommy was involved in a holdup to anger at the realization that his son would confess to a crime in which he was not involved.

The issue of range of knowledge and its relation to listening proceeds to function in this scene so as to distinguish the recently appointed Chief of Police from his subordinate officer. Because he has heard Tommy's previous confession concerning the terminated relationship with Marie, Ruddy is able to read Tommy's false confession toward the end of the novel in a light to which Ed is blind (or I should I say, deaf). Aware of his greater range of knowledge when it comes to Tommy's personal affairs, Ruddy dismisses his fellow officer: "Leave it to me, Ed. I'll get the truth out of 'im" (237). With Ed out of the room, Ruddy asks his son about the motivation behind his false confession: "'All of this started with what happened to Marie, didn't it, Tommy?'" (238). Tommy withholds a response, and Ruddy appeals to the therapeutic aspects of being heard: "'If you talk about it openly, maybe I can help you'" (238). Tommy claims he is beyond consolation, but his father persists: "'Now, tell me, what has this pretending you're a holdup man got to do with Marie?'" (238). Tommy evades his father's question, but he does express a vague desire: "'I want to go away,' Tommy said suddenly" (238). The major conflict concerning *A Father's Law* revolves around Ruddy's dysfunctional relationship with his son, and this conflict manifests more often than not as a result of the father's inability to listen to Tommy, despite the former's best intentions. Accordingly, Ruddy proceeds to dismiss his son's cry for help: "'You're going nowhere,' Ruddy snapped" (238). Tommy tries, however futilely, to communicate with his father: "'But I-I—'" only to find his father all the more intransigent: "'Shut up about it,' Ruddy snapped. 'If you keep talking like that, I'll have you sent to the clinic'" (238). Ruddy exacts the castrating "no" not unlike Cantor Rabinowitz in *The Jazz Singer*. The father seems

willing and able to listen to Tommy as long as he controls the situation, yet he repeatedly refuses to listen to his son whenever he encounters something he does not want to hear, which highlights the trouble with listening to that which we fear.

Like Rupert, Ruddy is disillusioned at the end of the narrative. Tommy continuously denies any connection between his false confession at the end of the novel and his failed relationship with Marie. When Ruddy informs his son that Marie claims to have been "cured," he tries to instill a sense of hope in Tommy, but the son will be the one who refuses to listen: "'No. I don't want to hear that,' Tommy's voice rose for the first time" (240). Tommy's "no" turns the tables of this conversation. It functions as an audial castration the likes of which I discussed in Chapter One of my dissertation regarding *The Jazz Singer*, only here it is the son who severs the father from any sense of power, authority and agency. The father's law is rendered impotent. When Ruddy asks Tommy what he plans to do next, the former "was surprised that he could pose the question so frankly, for it implicitly confessed his inability, his powerlessness to control the situation in which his son found himself, and he was admitting that he no longer felt any moral right to make demands in the name and in the fact of his being a father" (240). The trouble with listening, as I have suggested, is the way in which it can engender a sense of cognitive dissonance and trigger an abdication of moral authority in both *A Father's Law* and *Rope*; however, the protagonists in Wright's novel and Hitchcock's film find themselves in a predicament since they must listen so as to read the situation correctly in the first place.

Hitchcock and Wright address the notion of superior verses inferior minds, which more often than not, are determined in their respective narratives via the act of listening as opposed to simply hearing. As Matthews points out, Cold War culture was very much concerned with the distinction between skilled and inept readers: "Reading texts and studies of the postwar period repeatedly asserted that the uncertainty resulting from America's new geopolitical struggle could either be ameliorated or exacerbated by reading" (740). Accordingly, I argue, characters in postwar texts are privileged by their ability or marginalized by their inability to listen so as to discern fact from fiction.

When Rupert arrives at the dinner party, he greets the other guests with an insinuation that perhaps he does not always expect people to heed his words. Kenneth, who is also a former student, says, "Rupert, you're the same as ever. It's awfully good to see you again" (0:29:19). When Rupert responds, "Why?" Kenneth becomes flustered; but Rupert immediately puts him at ease, placing a hand on Kenneth's arm and instructing his former student to pay him no mind. Rupert's talk becomes increasingly dubious as he greets Mrs. Wilson (Edith Evanson), indicating how the superior mind must know when not to listen. When she informs him that she has prepared the "special patty you like," Rupert informs her that he "doesn't like it any more" (0:30:08). But before Mrs. Wilson can express her disappointment, Rupert reassures her: "No, no, no. I'm just teasing. Just teasing" (0:30:11). Mrs. Wilson responds: "You're awful," to which Rupert replies: "Thank you. Thank you" (0:30:15). Rupert's response is conspicuous in retrospect. Within the context of this scene, it seems to read as a playful exchange, but in hindsight, Rupert's reply to Mrs. Wilson, not to mention the joke that led to it, indicates a

degree of risk in listening. As I have argued in my discussion of the final scene in *Rope*, Rupert *is* awful when it comes to the theories he espouses concerning murder, which his misguided students seemingly misread so as to justify the killing of David Kentley.

Like *Rope*, *A Father's Law* represents the potential risk in inferior listeners misinterpreting a situation. While alone in his office leafing through reports of anonymous telephone calls concerning the murders in Brentwood Park, Ruddy "recalled that one day last year Ed Seigel had cynically suggested that a mythical murder be printed in the press just to see how many innocent people would swear that they had caught a glimpse of the fleeing murderer!" (198-199). Ed's suggestion led Ruddy to conclude, "'innocent people would be slitting one another's throats for a chance to sit in the electric chair.' Knowing the delusions of people, the law had wisely demanded that no unsubstantiated confessions for murder in the first-degree could be accepted" (199). Listening, here, entails a degree of recognition, agreement and approval; however, Ruddy's response to Ed's suggestion indicates one of the troubles with listening. If individuals who were not involved in the crime came forward to confess, why should Ruddy—an arm, or should I say ear, of the law—acknowledge them?

Ruddy thinks of the world in binary terms. He goes in fear of ambiguity and relies on Ed for guidance when it comes to reading the subtext of a situation. When Ruddy expresses his belief "'that most people hid their guilt,'" Ed counters: "'Not all of 'em, and not all the time'" (199). Of course, Ruddy is thinking of this memory in the context of his existential crisis—first established along the lines of his estranged relationship with his son—for Ed sounds very much like Tommy talking about the Thompson execution,

which I discussed above: "'The burden of guilt that some people carry is too much for them to bear. They yearn to confess but don't know what to confess to until something is suggested to them in the press. After they have confessed, they have some peace'" (199). I would argue that such comfort comes only when someone listens to, i.e., seems to acknowledge and accept, said confessions. More germane to my point, however, is the way in which listening, i.e., accepting as true a false confession, can obstruct the process of justice to which Ruddy has committed his life. There are times when one must know not to listen—a point, as I have noted, that becomes all the more resonant later in the novel when Tommy falsely confesses to a crime in which he was not involved.

The phenomenon of false confessions complicates the desire to be heard and the process of listening. Ruddy seems more than able to discern a lie from the truth, but Ed is teaching the Chief of Police about listening for displaced guilt. Once again, Wright depicts the ways in which listening becomes a means of reading the subtext underlying a given statement. The superior listener, be it Ed or Ruddy in *A Father's Law* or Rupert in *Rope*, depends on a relatively greater range of knowledge in order to read between the lines of what has been heard.

The notion of superior and inferior listeners relates directly to Nietzsche's theory of the Superman, and is one of the main threads with which I am connecting *A Father's Law* to *Rope*. As I have pointed out, Rupert, unlike the other dinner guests, knows better than to dismiss the anecdote concerning Phillip strangling chickens on Brandon's mother's farm. In fact, he uses it to launch into a lecture on the motivations behind murder, standing up and walking directly toward the camera: "Well, is it all over?" he

asks. After Brandon says that he's afraid so, Rupert continues: "Oh, what a pity. In another moment, you might have been strangling each other as a chicken" (0:34:59). Mrs. Atwater interjects: "Mr. Cadell, really." Apparently, she is unwilling to entertain the idea of murder, the very kind responsible for her nephew's dead body that rests, unbeknownst to her, in the cassone upon which the evening's dinner is being served. Of course, she hears but she refuses to listen, that is she refuses to accept Rupert's supposition.

So much depends upon the range of knowledge, for judging from the looks of concern on their faces, Brandon and Phillip suspect enough not to dismiss Rupert's charge. They listen as he proceeds to explain his radical theory to which Brandon and Phillip had alluded prior to his arrival. The former headmaster declares, "a man's honor was at stake […] And personally, I think a chicken is as good a reason for murder as a blonde, a mattress full of dollar bills or any customary unimaginative reason" (0:35:13). As I have argued, there is an inherent trouble with listening functioning in Hitchcock's narrative, which renders Janet's next line significant as it encapsulates one of the main questions motivating my argument. She asks, "you don't really approve of murder, Rupert, if I may?" (0:35:17). The final clause indicates the trepidation Janet has in questioning Rupert, yet she overcomes such fears. She does not listen to Rupert indiscriminately, the way Kenneth and Mrs. Wilson have earlier in the film. *Rope* relies on the theory of superior and inferior individuals, and at this point in the film, Janet demonstrates her superior ability to listen, since it is she who asks the crucial question, which in many ways serves as the kernel of Hitchcock's film. Does Rupert mean what he says? Should they (and, consequently, we) listen to him? Rupert answers: "You may, and

I do" (0:35:19). His response to Janet serves two purposes. It not only suggests that he is approachable and that his theories can be challenged but also indicates that he stands by what he says, a stance that, as I have discussed, will become increasingly problematic by the end of the film.

In this chapter, I have tried to analyze the ways in which Hitchcock's *Rope* inspired Wright's last novel. So, it is not surprising to find the theme of superior and inferior minds in *A Father's Law*; and in novel as in film, the motif is represented most often via the act of listening. To demonstrate this intertextually connection, let me return one last time to the first chapter in which, trying to foster their relationship, Ruddy enters Tommy's room to engage in conversation. Wright immediately addresses the power relations at work: "That was what [Ruddy] did not like. Tommy always seemed to anticipate what he would say, always defined the relations between them before he could" (10). Tommy seems to be superior in the skills of listening here, which distresses his father. What Ruddy does not like is Tommy asking questions. His son had merely asked if he was heading to police headquarters. Perhaps confusing this interaction between a father and his son with a police interrogation, as he does throughout the novel, Ruddy attempts to gain control of the conversation by asking Tommy about his schoolwork. However, listening to his son profess a passion for academic matters, such as sociology, triggers another defensive reaction in Ruddy:

> There was silence, Ruddy felt offended. This was the core of the difference between them. Tommy had judged him. Had spoken from a core of meaning beyond the scope of Ruddy's life. And that which was beyond the core of

> Ruddy's life was either superior to it or inferior to it. And since he could not imagine that his son could be in some way his superior, he felt that he was, well, not exactly inferior but different, something like those tough young men who were picked up pimping or housebreaking. (11)

Or, as in the case of Brandon and Phillip in *Rope*, murdering their college cohorts.

When placing Wright's novel within the context not only of Nietzsche's theory of the Superman that inspired the murderers but also of the Loeb and Leopold case that motivated Hitchcock and Wright, this issue of superiority and inferiority that surfaces in Ruddy's mind accumulates greater significance. While meeting the police commissioner in the middle of the night, having just been promoted to Chief of Police, Ruddy learns of a murder case closely resembling the real life Loeb and Leopold case. Bill, the commissioner, references the first "semi-criminal" death to occur in Brentwood Park back in the 1920s: "Three students decided to commit the perfect crime. One actually offered himself as a guinea pig and helped plan his own murder so that the police would never find out" (55). John Davis and Harris Potts, the two murderers in Wright's fictional Kennedy case, were so anxious to help in the investigation that the police began to suspect them of foul play: "The moment we touched 'em, they confessed" (55). The commissioner's recollection of the Kennedy case serves several purposes. First, it reiterates the tension between "rich boys and girls who spend their time in university classrooms" and police officers like Bill and Ruddy. Second, it alludes more directly than any other part of the novel to Richard Loeb and Nathan Leopold, both of whom were

highly educated and hailed from upper-class families. Third, and most importantly for my argument, it echoes the case of Brandon and Phillip in *Rope*.

Again, during the dinner scene in *Rope*, Rupert espouses his theory regarding murder, which explicitly injects Nietzsche's theory of the Superman into Hitchcock's film. After Janet questions his sincerity, Rupert contemplates the benefits of murdering those whom he deems inferior: "Think of the problems it would solve: unemployment, poverty, standing in line for theater tickets" (0:35:26). While Rupert pontificates the privileges that murder could provide, Mrs. Atwater sits by his side with a curious grin on her face: "I must say I've had a perfectly dreadful time getting tickets to that new musical…What's it called? You know…" (0:35:32). She turns to Rupert, who demonstrates his wit and ability to listen to, i.e., remember, previous conversations: "The Something with What's-Her-Name?" (0:35:35). Rupert continues: "My dear Mrs. Atwater, careful application of the trigger finger and a pair of seats in the first row is yours for the shooting. And have you had any difficulty in getting into our velvet rope restaurants?" Mrs. Atwater laughs at Rupert's performance, as does Janet, who, off-screen, says, "Rupert, you're the end." Hitchcock repeatedly causes us to question Rupert's sincerity by injecting a tone of humor into the conversation. As soon as Hitchcock would paint Rupert as a jokester, he will just as quickly reinforce the former headmaster's dire theory of superior and inferior minds. Kenneth attempts to join in the morbid mirth: "There's a hotel clerk I could cheerfully flick a knife at." But Rupert's response establishes his authority and marginalizes Kenneth, presumably deeming him inferior: "Oh no, sorry, knives may not be used on hotel employees, they are in the death-

by-slow-torture category." Turning to Mrs. Atwater, who continues to laugh nearly uncontrollably, Rupert adds: "along with bird-lovers, small children and tap-dancers. Landlords, of course, are another matter. You seeking an apartment? Call on our Miss Sash Weight of the blunt instrument department" (0:36:26). Mrs. Atwater is not the only dinner guest enjoying Rupert's performance, for we hear Janet continue to laugh off-screen.

In this case, Mrs. Atwater, like Janet before her and Mr. Kentley after, puts her finger on the pulse of the conflict in *Rope*. Eventually, she challenges Rupert's claim: "What a divine idea. If it suits your purpose, merely…" pausing, as she seems to work through the consequences of Rupert's theory "…but then we'd all be murdering each other" (0:36:35). Rupert is quick to refute her: "Oh no. After all, murder is" and he pauses ever-so-slightly to correct himself, "or it should be, an art. Not one of the seven lively perhaps, but an art nevertheless. And as such, the privilege of committing it, should be reserved for those few who are really superior individuals" (0:36:53). As Rupert is espousing what sounds very much like Nietzsche's theory of the Superman, the camera pans right onto Mr. Kentley, who repositions himself on the couch and redirects his gaze out the window and onto the streets of New York, presumably thinking of his son's whereabouts. Eventually, the camera settles on Brandon, who adds an addendum to Rupert's claim: "And the victims, whose inferior lives are unimportant anyway" (0:36:56).

Again, Hitchcock injects a tone of humor and jest into the dialog, leading the audience to question Rupert's sincerity regarding his espoused theories. The former

headmaster turns to the other dinner guests and adds an addendum of his own: “Now, mind you, I don’t hold with the extremists who believe there should be open season for murder all year round. No, personally, I would prefer to have ‘cut a throat week’ or ‘strangulation day’” (0:37:12). The camera, which has panned back to Rupert, also frames Mr. Kentley on the right side of the screen. He returns his gaze from the window, down to the floor and then to Rupert, as he will insert a sober perspective on the matter: “I must confess, I really don’t appreciate this morbid humor” (0:37:20). And why would he? After all, while we know more than him, Mr. Kentley is aware of enough to be concerned for his son’s well being—as Janet mentioned earlier in this scene, it is unlike David to be late. Rupert’s reply to Mr. Kentley’s objection indicates the degree to which he seems to stand by his theory, if not necessarily the manner in which he has delivered it: “Well, the humor was unintentional.” His reply seems to assume that Mr. Kentley’s distress stems from the humor and not the grave seriousness of Rupert’s words. Consequently, Rupert's sincerity is challenged again by Mr. Kentley who seems to echo Janet and Mrs. Atwater’s concern voiced earlier in this scene: “You’re not serious about these theories?” Brandon comes to his former instructor’s defense: “Of course he is.” Mr. Kentley accuses Brandon and Rupert of pulling his leg, which leads Brandon to insist: “No, why do you think that?” Mr. Kentley explains: “Well, Brandon, the notion that murder is an art which a few superior human beings should be allowed to practice…” Rupert interjects: “In season,” at which point the other dinner guests laugh, causing Mr. Kentley to conclude: “I know you’re not serious.” Hitchcock has brought the tension

underlying his narrative to the surface. Is Brandon, or Rupert for that matter, serious? If not, what happens when someone mistakes them to be?

Mr. Kentley will humor Brandon, asking who determines the inferior beings and the justification for their extinction. Brandon responds: "The few who are privileged to commit murder." When Mr. Kentley asks Brandon to be more specific, he replies: "Oh, myself, Phillip, possibly Rupert." At this point, Rupert utters an audible grunt, indicating a possible distinction between him and his former students, all the while inserting what could be interpreted as humor back into the discussion: "I'm sorry Kenneth, you're out" (0:37:57). Once again, it is difficult to determine if Rupert is joking or if he is marginalizing Kenneth, deeming him inferior to the superior likes of Phillip, Brandon and himself.

Janet and Mrs. Atwater laugh, supporting the interpretation of Rupert's aside as a joke, but Mr. Kentley reminds the room that he is serious. "So are we," Brandon retorts: "The few are those men of such intellectual and cultural superiority that they're above the traditional *moral* concepts. Good and evil, right and wrong were invented for the ordinary average man and the inferior man because he needs them." Mr. Kentley refers directly to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and the Western philosophical tradition to which Brandon and Rupert's ideas belong: "Obviously, you agree with Nietzsche and his theory of the Superman." Brandon responds in the affirmative, and Mr. Kentley retorts by pointing to then recent history: "So did Hitler." Brandon asserts his supreme sense of superiority: "Hitler was a paranoid savage. His Superman, all Fascist Supermen, were brainless murderers. I'd hang any who are left. But then, you see, I'd hang them first for being

stupid. I'd hang all incompetents and fools anyway, there are far too many in the world." The listening audience must pay particular attention to Brandon's choice means of execution in this declaration. So must Rupert, who later will notice Phillip's reaction to the bundle of books Brandon gives to Mr. Kentley that are held together by the very rope used to strangle the latter's son.

The Nietzschean talk connects Hitchcock's film to Wright's last novel, which was my main objective in this chapter. More importantly, for my argument, the talk depicts the trouble with listening in that *Rope* interrogates the relationship between theory and practice. Just as Janet had questioned Rupert's sincerity, Mr. Kentley will test that of Brandon, daring the latter to practice what he preaches: "Then, perhaps, you should hang me, Brandon, frankly because I'm so stupid that I don't know whether you are all serious or not. In any case, I'd rather not hear any more of your, forgive me, contempt for humanity and for the standards of a world that I believe is civilized." Mr. Kentley foreshadows the trouble with listening that Rupert will experience at the end of the film, i.e., the disconcerting effect of listening to what one does not want to hear.[lvii] Brandon challenges the notion of a civilized world: "Perhaps what is called civilized is hypocrisy?" While making this claim, he turns to Rupert for support, at which point the camera pans left to the former headmaster who senses the conversation has become much more than academic. He and Phillip redirect the conversation to the books that Mr. Kentley had come to see, as Brandon tries to make amends: "I apologize sir. Again, I'm afraid I let myself get carried away." Mr. Kentley opts to walk away from the conversation, but Rupert decides to pursue the matter just as he will in a later scene with

Philip at the piano: "Ah, Brandon, you are really pushing your point rather hard. You aren't planning to do away with a few inferiors by any chance, would you?" Rupert, whose sincerity has been compromised prior to this scene, now questions that of his former student. Brandon responds: "I'm a creature of whim. Who knows?" leading Rupert to conclude: "I see," as he walks out of the living room to peruse the books with Phillip and Mr. Kentley (0:39:43). While Rupert employs the language of *seeing* to communicate to Brandon that he understands, he has in fact exercised his ability to listen in order to reach such an interpretation of what has been said.

Lastly, the scene between Rupert and Philip at the piano during dessert, after the chicken strangling conversation, is emblematic of the complex nature of listening as it functions in Hitchcock's film. At this point, Rupert is alone in the living room with Phillip and admits that he is in an awkward position, seeming "to be the only one having a good time." Rupert proceeds to turn on the light that sits atop the piano, asking: "What's going on?" Instead of answering, Phillip asks if he would mind turning the light off. Rupert obliges and apologizes, as Phillip explains: "I don't like to play with light in my eyes." The use of light in this context suggests a type of police interrogation we might expect to find in *A Father's Law*. Rupert looks slightly from side to side, perhaps indicating a growing concern resulting from what he has heard: "You know Phillip," he says while leaning on the piano and looking down at his former student, whose fingers ever-so-slightly slow down, "I get quite intrigued when people don't answer questions." Rupert's response suggests an agitation with going unrecognized. He expresses a desire to have others listen to him, which will complicate our reading of his response to

Brandon, at the end of the film, who claims only to have listened all too well to the former headmaster.

In addition to the dialog, we must take into account the score when analyzing this scene, for the music played on the piano exposes Phillip's emotions. Jack Sullivan explains: "As Rupert persists in his interrogation, Phillip performs over his questions, as if he hasn't heard them, but his stop-go phrasing and jerky rubato betray his nervousness as distant police sirens blend with Poulenc's bitter-sweet chords" (146). Sullivan's insightful analysis of the soundtrack here indicates a subtle way in which Hitchcock represents the act of listening that exceeds mere dialog or even visual eye lines. While Phillip continues to evade Rupert's inquiries, the latter offers to get another drink for the former. The camera pans to follow Rupert as he walks to the table upon which the liquor rests. "You're very fond of that little tune, aren't you?" Again, Rupert indicates his ability to listen, to identify the song and to recall that Phillip was playing it earlier in the evening. He then returns to what is on his mind: "You know, Phillip, I wish I could come straight out with what I want to know. Unfortunately, I don't know anything. I merely suspect." Without the visual confirmation that will come at the end of the film—in the form not only of David's hat but also of his dead body in the cassone—Rupert cannot interpret, with any certainty, what he has heard. Sans such corroborating evidence, Rupert is reduced to a suspect listening subject at this point. When he returns to the piano with drink in hand and begins to repeat himself, Phillip interjects: "I heard you." The word choice here is important as it depicts the distinction between hearing and listening. Phillip has heard what his former headmaster has said, but he will refuse to entertain Rupert's

innuendos—that is he refuses to listen, indicating one way in which the refusal to listen functions as a means of rebellion or resistance. Furthermore, Phillip's interjection is not unlike Tommy's "no" when Ruddy talks about Marie in *A Father's Law*.

As the soundscape becomes more cacophonous in *Rope*, listening becomes more difficult. Rupert grabs a metronome that was atop the piano and asks Phillip if he uses it. "Sometimes," he answers, and Rupert says: "I thought only beginners did." Phillip breaks down: "Alright Rupert, I'll ask you. What do you suspect?" Rupert sets the metronome in motion, which registers as a heartbeat on the soundtrack and serves, perhaps, as an allusion to the sound of the beating heart in Edgar Allen Poe's famous tale of murder, guilt and interrogation. While looking down at the metronome, Rupert asks: "Where's David, Phillip?" Phillip says he does not know, and asks Rupert to explain himself. Rupert declares in an accusatorial tone: "Brandon knows." When Phillip asks: "Does he?" Rupert responds ever so quickly: "Doesn't he?" Phillip continues to play coy: "Not that I know of," but Rupert does not believe him. Rupert is the ever-discerning listening subject: "Oh come now," he presses and Phillip insists: "I don't. Why don't you ask Brandon?" Rupert informs Phillip that he has, then adds: "But he's too busy maneuvering the other two points of the triangle." Rupert returns to his interrogation of his former student: "What for, Phillip? Just what is Brandon trying to do with Janet and Kenneth." Phillip laughs nearly uncontrollably. Based on earlier moments in which Rupert had been joking, the audience is left to ponder the sincerity of this latest accusation concerning Brandon's intentions. How do we interpret Phillip's laugh? Is Rupert kidding? Is he off-base? Or has he stumbled onto the truth? Rupert asks this very question: "What's the

matter, why are you laughing? […] Am I so far off the track?" Phillip responds with a wide grin, looking straight into his former headmaster's eyes: "There's nothing going on Rupert." Rupert readjusts the metronome, as Phillip looks up, then says: "You're more than usually allergic to the truth tonight, Phillip. That's all. That's the second time you haven't told it."

Hitchcock connects this scene in which Rupert plays the role of investigator back to the scene in which he first establishes his protagonist's ability to listen. When Rupert reminds Phillip of the conversation earlier in the evening when the latter claimed to have never strangled a chicken, Phillip retorts: "You're confused. Brandon dreamt that up for the sake of a very unfunny joke." As I argue above, the issue of humor complicates the listening situation, but Rupert will listen beyond the noise, refusing to accept Phillip's theory: "No, he didn't. No he didn't, Phillip. And if you'll think back very carefully, you'll realize that I know he didn't." Rupert explains to Phillip how he gained the range of knowledge that allowed him to interpret the conversation regarding the strangled chickens: "A year ago, I was at the farm. Do you remember? One morning I saw you display your handiwork. You're quite a good chicken strangler, as I recall." Phillip tries to walk his statement back: "Well I, I just meant that Brandon's story wasn't true. I didn't mean I hadn't killed any chickens." Always the superior listener, Rupert reminds Phillip that is not what he had said. When Phillip pleads: "Well I, I didn't think it was a suitable topic of conversation while we were eating," Rupert demonstrates his skills as a listener. "You could've said that," he counters, depicting how the act of listening involves

interpreting the significance of what has not been spoken just as much as focusing on what has been said.

If, as Chion states, the verb *to hear* "is used to name all that enters via the ears and registers automatically on consciousness" and *to listen* "involves the act of paying full attention to a part of what one hears" (286), then the trouble with listening may very well be focusing on the wrong part of the audial realm. Rupert will not make such a mistake, further demonstrating his superior listening skills by continuing his interrogation: "We're not eating now, Phillip? What'd you lie to me for?" As Rupert continues to press him, Phillip aborts the conversation, standing from the piano bench and claiming: "I can't play with that thing." Phillip is referring to the metronome, which has continued to tick throughout his conversation with Rupert. As Sullivan notes, "the clacking metronome increases the extraordinary tension of the scene" (140). Phillip shifts his gaze offscreen, down and slightly to the left, just before Brandon enters the frame with Mr. Kentley carrying a stack of books tied together with the very rope used to strangle his son. As Phillip's eyes widen at the sight of the rope, Rupert's head turns as if to take stock of the visible evidence that informs his reading of the conversation with Phillip (0:46:58-0:49:30). Listening plays a complicated role in this scene. Rupert is able to recognize the difficulty Phillip has concentrating on his performance due not only to the interference of the metronome, as Phillip would have us believe, but also to his unrelenting interrogation. Not unlike Ruddy in *A Father's Law*, Rupert must be able to

Figure 35

distinguish the lies from the truth; however, as I have argued, such a need to listen, in the end, engenders a state of crisis in both patriarchal figures.

I could continue my comparison of *Rope* and *A Father's Law*, for despite their many differences, Hitchcock and Wright have more in common than previously thought. As I have argued, both artists employed Nietzsche's philosophy of the Superman in their work. Both demonstrate the ways in which listening functions in the context of interpersonal relations and the ways in which listening may expose relations of power—i.e., between superior and inferior listeners. Both depict the way in which listening leads to criminal complicity. Furthermore, both represent the ways in which listening may function as a form of appropriation; the ways in which the listening situation or context influences how one makes sense of what has been heard; and the ways in which listening depends on other senses, particularly, in the case of *Rope* and *A Father's Law*, sight and, at least in *A Father's Law*, touch. Both artists depict the trouble with listening, particularly as it engenders cognitive dissonance in a patriarchal figure. Lastly, as Kristin L. Matthews and J.W. Ward[lviii] point out, respectively, both *Rope* and *A Father's Law* are narratives about reading and, just as importantly, misreading.

As I have argued throughout my dissertation, listening functions as a trope, signifying, among other things, the act of reading. Conversely, the phenomenon of misreading may imply a failure or inability to listen—the likes of which I have discussed in relation to Jackie Rabinowitz's father in *The Jazz Singer*, Alice White's boyfriend and the police, more generally, in *Blackmail*, Frederick Douglass's slave master as well as the abolitionists in the former slave's first autobiography and Bigger Thomas's prosecutors as

well as his defense attorney in *Native Son*. In *Rope*, however, Brandon and Phillip listen all-too-well to Rupert. The misreading, whether by Brandon, Phillip or Rupert, would be of Nietzsche's theoretical musings. Wright does not make a similarly explicit commentary on the misinterpretation of Nietzsche's theory in *A Father's Law*; however, I am left to wonder if Tommy merely executes the kind of perfect murder espoused theoretically by the professors he encounters at the university. All of this begs an analysis of reading, misreading and listening as it relates to Nietzsche's treatise on the Superman, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Perhaps the university professor in *A Father's Law* is not the mouth for Tommy's ears, just as Rupert in *Rope* is the mouth for neither Brandon's nor Phillip's ears. In the passage I have included in the epigraph to this chapter, Zarathustra laments those who misread his teachings, i.e., those who fail to understand. But how are we to read Nietzsche's philosophy? What are the risks of listening to Zarathustra? Nietzsche's synesthetic juxtaposition—those *listening eyes* of which Zarathustra speaks—may very well signal the trouble with listening that characterizes so many cinematic and literary narratives of the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

One film from my childhood served as the germ for my project. In *White Men Can't Jump* (1992), Sidney Deane (Wesley Snipes) admonishes his partner in crime, Billy Hoyle (Woody Harrelson) for playing a Jimi Hendrix cassette tape on the car stereo: "You can't hear Jimi," Deane chides. "You can listen to Jimi, but you can't hear him. There's a difference man. Just because you're listening to him doesn't mean you're hearing him." For years, I have tried to decipher the meaning of those lines. What exactly is the difference between listening and hearing? What role does race play in such processes? Can Billy hear Jimi, and if not, what are the consequences of his listening? More germane to my argument in the preceding pages, what is the greater legacy concerning the matters of hearing and listening that may inform an analysis of Sidney Deane's lines? I believe that my nascent interest in such questions—and the many other questions that have arose as I have pursued my project at the University of Arizona—has compelled me to explore the role of listening in film and literature more generally. I mention Ron Shelton's film here not only to point to an early inspiration for my dissertation but also to demonstrate the wide scope of my thesis. Such a broad and expansive line of inquiry led to a cumbersome list of texts ripe for analysis in this dissertation, which seemed at times daunting, but I believe such scope will only help me in future academic endeavors that may germinate from this project.

Over four years ago, while walking back to the Modern Languages Building on the campus of the University of Arizona, a professor gave me some sage advice for the

dissertation process upon which I was about to embark: identify the problem. When it comes to minority literature, when it comes to the representation of race and gender, when it comes to the development of narrative conflict, the problem, so often, comes down to that of listening. Who listens? Why do we listen at all? What complicates our desire to listen? For that matter, what motivates an appeal to be heard? Is it a universal desire? Do authors and filmmakers, i.e., artists, have a particular drive to be heard (in a metaphorical if not always a literal sense)? These are some of the questions that inspired my dissertation, and admittedly, I have only begun to address them.

The questions I have raised concerning *Blackmail* and *Native Son* beg further exploration of the relationship between the representation of gender relations and the appeal to be heard across gender lines in film and literature more generally. For instance, the desire to confess, and more importantly for my argument, to have one's confession recognized, connects the story of Alice White to, say, Dianne Tremayne Jessup (Jean Simmons) in Otto Preminger's *Angel Face* (1952). Furthermore, my analysis of listening in *Rope* begs further exploration of the narrative use of sound in Patrick Hamilton's play, upon which Hitchcock based his film. Moreover, my discussion in Chapter Four leads me to inquire as to the role of listening in other works by Hamilton, particularly *Hangover Square*.

While I pay close attention to the appeal to be heard in the work of a few abolitionists, civil rights leaders and black novelists, I could expand my focus on the role that listening plays in African American literature more generally. One of the implications of my project is the need to analyze the appeal to be heard as manifested in

slave narratives penned by women authors (I'm thinking specifically of Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*). I could also write about the role of listening as it functions in novels of the nineteenth century, such as William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*. Moreover, I feel compelled to address, in the future, the role that listening plays in twentieth-century novels written by someone other than Richard Wright. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* comes to mind immediately, and in the future, I would like to build upon not only my work but that of Nicole Leta Brittingham Furlonge who wrote a dissertation entitled "On the Lower Frequencies: Listening and African American Expressive Culture." If Ralph Ellison's invisible man speaks (but on a different frequency) for you, who listens? The implication of my project is the need for a more expansive analysis of the ways in which listening functions across African American literature—not only in the work of Ellison but also in that of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, to name only two other artists.

Whether it comes in spoken or written form, speech is to sound as listening is to hearing. I have focused, here in my project, on the dialectical relationship between speaking and listening as both concern the art of persuasion. In future projects, I would like to investigate the ways in which the Rhetorical tradition discusses the role of listening as it concerns the art of persuasion. Another implication of my discussion of Walker, Douglass, Du Bois and Wright in Chapter Two is a need to situate their oratory in the greater Rhetorical tradition of Aristotle or the Roman historian Tacitus to name just two of the Ancient rhetoricians. I could also continue to write about the work I have begun here in the greater context of adaptation studies, narrative theory (particularly that

of J. Hillis Miller), post-structuralism (particularly that of Jacques Derrida), and more generally, theories of representation, for many of my close readings inform these fields of study and more.

At the end of his most recent book, the renowned film critic David Thomson declares that "listening makes a curious, alternative existence, as real as speech and sound effects, yet as fantastic as music—lovely, impossible, lunatic, and phantom. It is like sex, and that's why there is so little need to try showing sex itself in movies" (524-525). I'm not entirely sure what Thomson means exactly, but I feel compelled to note the way in which he refers to the functions of listening. The nod toward the role of listening in our cinematic experience may seem to some too little too late, for in his exhaustive "story of the movies," Thomson repeatedly neglects to talk about the sounds that are such an important aspect of the big screens that constitute the focus of his project. Like many cinephiles, Thomson too often privileges the image at the expense of the sound emanating throughout the theater, an oversight (or should I say, under-listening?) that has led others, like Rick Altman, Elisabeth Weiss, Amy Laurence, and Caryl Flinn to build careers around the analysis of film sound. Chief among these pioneers in the analytical pursuit of film sound is Michel Chion. Perhaps no one is as attentive to the interaction between image and sound, which as he argues, constitutes the true revolution that is cinema. In his work, Chion has developed a theory called the audial-visual contract, which I have employed to address the way in which listening constitutes not only what is heard but also, more often than not, what is seen. Not surprisingly, Chion's work is as much about listening as it is about sound. Yet Chion and others continue to focus more

on the (re)production of sound at the expense of an in-depth analysis of the process behind the reception of it. A natural outgrowth of sound studies is a more refined focus on listening. Perhaps this logical progression explains the appearance of countless articles and books on listening published in recent years.

In the past decade or so, listening has become a field of study all to its own. In 2005, Beverly M. Weber published "Beyond the Culture Trap: Immigrant Women in Germany, Planet-Talk, and a Politics of Listening"; Terry W. Thompson published "Blackwood's 'The Listener'"; Jonathan Kahana published "Cinema and the Ethics of Listening: Isaac Julien's *Frantz Fanon*"; Lourdes Jorrelles Pont published "Failure to Listen to the Voice of the Ancestors"; Douglass Bruster published "How to Listen to Mamet: A Response to Maurice Charney"; Daniel Roux published "I Speak to You and I Listen to the Voice Coming Back: Recording Solitary Confinement in the Apartheid Prison"; Kanta Kochhara Lindgren published "Hear! Hear! A Case for Listening"; Elicia Clements published "Virginia Woolf, Ethel Smyth, and Music: Listening as a Productive Mode of Social Interaction;" Helen Vendler published *Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman and Ashbery*. In the same year, Brookney C. Gondara wrote a dissertation entitled "Testimonio: Ne'aahtove—Listen to Me! Voices from the Edge: Educational Stories of Northern Cheyenne Women." In 2006, Reuven Tsur published "Delivery Style and Listener Response in the Rhythmical Performance of Shakespeare's Sonnets"; Gabrielle Meltzer published "Finding the Inner Silence to Listen"; Stephanie Rowe published "'Listen to Me': Frankenstein as an Appeal to Mercy and Justice, on Behalf of the Persecuted Animals"; Merle Brown published "Poetic Listening;" Marianne

Noble published "Sympathetic Listening in Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave' and *My Bondage and My Freedom.*" Also in 2006, Jason Briggs Cornier wrote a dissertation entitled "Learning to Listen: The Collaboration and Art of the SITI." In 2007, Barbara R. Woshinsky published "Convent Parleys: Listening to Women's Voices in Madame de Villediev's Memoires de la vie de Henriette-Sylvie de Moliere"; Jed Rasula published "'Listening to Incense': Melomania and the Pathos of Emancipation"; and Christopher Swift wrote a dissertation entitled "Listening to Zarathustra: Friedrich Nietzsche and Rhetoric." In 2008, Jennifer Lynn Stoever wrote a dissertation entitled "The Contours of the Sonic Color Line: Slavery, Segregation, and the Cultural Politics of Listening"; and in 2009, Michael Merva published "An Illusion of Understanding: Listeners and Tellers in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Cars McCuller's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*." While extensive, this is by no means an exhaustive list of writings resulting from a simple search of the terms "listen*" and "literature" on EBSCO Host back in 2008 when I began my project. Admittedly, I risk belaboring the point, but I want to suggest that a field of listening studies has emerged in recent years. In fact, an annual conference in Australia testifies to the growing interest, on a popular as well as an academic level, in listening.

ENDNOTES

[i] While Wright wrote the first, and only, draft of *A Father's Law* shortly before his death in 1960, it was not published until 2008.

[ii] In short, productivity increased when workers believed management to be willing to listen.

[iii] Furthermore, at the end of *Souls*, Du Bois employs the act of listening as a metaphor for reading, which is an expanded meaning of the term that plays an integral role in my argument, particularly as it pertains to chapters two and four of my dissertation.

[iv] See *The Subject Of Semiotics* and *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*.

[v] In Chapter Two, I will discuss in greater depth the long and often troubled history of blackface minstrelsy and the significance of the use of burnt cork in *The Jazz Singer*.

[vi] Sara's reference to her husband's complexion is ironic since she is talking to her son who is in blackface.

[vii] See, for example, Jack Sullivan's *Hitchcock's Music*.

[viii] See Durgnat, Raymond and Modleski, Tania. "Hitchcock's *Blackmail*." *PMLA*, 103.1, (Jan., 1988). 62-63. Durgnat and Modleski's excerpt from *PMLA*'s "Forum" section represents a public correspondence between Raymond Durgnat and Tania Modleski. In a letter to the editor, Durgnat is critical of Modleski's recently published article "Rape Versus Mans/laughter: Hitchcock's *Blackmail* and Feminist Interpretation." Modleski's pointed response emphasizes the critical importance of reading the incident in Crewe's apartment as a rape rather than a mere "forceful embrace." The way in which the murder scene is interpreted influences the audience's reading of the scene in which Alice walks the streets all night. Durgnat would read the score as representing Alice's *guilty* conscience whereas Modleski would read the same score as representing Alice's *traumatized* psyche.

[ix] Tania Modleski, in *The Women Who Knew Too Much*: "Lindsay Anderson describes the incident leading to the murder as a seduction; Donald Spoto calls it an act of 'violent love' on the part of the artist: 'his passion overcomes him and he attempts to make violent love to her.' John Russell Taylor characterizes it as 'a fairly violent pass.' Hitchcock himself uses the word 'rape' on one occasion and 'seduction' on another, suggesting that for him, as for many men, there's not much difference between the two" (20).

[x] See Kaja Silverman, *The Subject Of Semiotics*. "[S]uture is not so much one theory as a group of overlapping theories. Whereas for some theoreticians it can be isolated in the shot/reverse shot formation, for others it is inherent in all of the operations which constitute narrativity. However, the theoreticians of suture agree that it provides the agency whereby the subject emerges within discourse, and (at least ideally) takes up a position congruent with the existing cultural order. Feminist writers like Mulvey, Rose and Johnston also suggest that whether suture is taken in its most specialized or its

broadest sense it always implies a sexual differentiation. Moreover, they suggest that it is precisely at the point where suture joins with female subjectivity that it is most vulnerable to subversion" (235-236).

[xi] According to Wood: "The landlady's appearance here is a component of another formation within the overall structure that is an instance of virtually perfect symmetry. She appears three times. The middle occasion is very strongly marked by the use of non-realist cinematic devices: Alice's scream when she sees the extended arm of the derelict in the street becomes the landlady's scream when she finds Crewe's body (one of the familiar textbook examples of Hitchcock's inventive use of sound); and this is followed by the use of split screen to show her phone call to the police. This occurs at almost exactly the film's midpoint, and her two other appearances are grouped almost equidistantly around it: the conversation with Crewe (approximately twenty minutes from the film's beginning), her interrogation in the police station (approximately twenty minutes from the end)" (265-266). Indeed, the landlady's position within the structure of the narrative emphasizes her importance; however, Wood neglects to pursue the *narrative* significance of the displaced sound in this scene. For again, Alice's scream does not cut to the landlady's voice on the soundtrack.

[xii] It is worth noting that Annie Ondra's voice is dubbed in the making of the sound version of *Blackmail*, begging the question so cleverly addressed in *Singing in the Rain* (1952): for whom does the film speak?

[xiii] When analyzing the point-of-audition in cinema, it is constructive to note when the audience is privy to both sides of a telephone conversation. Had we heard what the caller had to say to Detective Frank, we would be more likely to identify with him. Having no such access to the sounds represented on the other end of the call, the range of knowledge is limited and as a result we are alienated from Frank's perspective.

[xiv] Robin Wood speculates that Frank in fact wills Tracy to flee the residence later in the scene; however, if the detective did want Tracy to escape, why would he make such an escape more difficult by locking the door?

[xv] I will discuss the trope of listening as it functions within the context of judicial systems in subsequent chapters.

[xvi] According to Christopher P. Jacobs, "a symptomatic interpretation looks at the film as part of the broad context of society, reflecting and illustrating themes prevalent in the culture, in the time and place it was made, and possibly in the creator's personal life experience. This level of interpretation tries to recognize symbolic content, identifying characters and situations as metaphors for something else, or possibly seeing the entire story as an allegory about something else" ("Film Theory and Approaches to Criticism, or, What Did that Movie *Mean*").

[xvii] See *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*.

[xviii] See *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America*.

[xix] In his *Appeal*, Walker allows for the salvation of the oppressors through the reformation of their understanding of African American identity. While ignorant in regards to the true identity of black people, white people remain doomed to the wrath of Walker's angry God. For such a group of oppressors, reformation serves as the catalyst

toward metaphysical salvation. A people, guilty of oppressing God's creatures, may escape damnation only by reconsidering their assumptions concerning African Americans. Throughout the pamphlet, Walker attempts to save as many individuals as possible, which includes both the oppressed and, quite nobly on the author's part, their oppressors. At the end of his *Appeal*, Walker reminds the oppressor of the only means to such salvation:

As unexpected, strange, and wild as these propositions may to some appear, it is no less a fact, that unless they are complied with, the Americans of the United States, though they may for a little while escape, God will yet weigh them in a balance, and if they are not superior to other men, as they have represented themselves to be, he will give them wretchedness to their very heart's content. (73)

The oppressor must reform his opinion of the oppressed and consider them as members of the human race, lest such a sinner fall victim to the wrath of an angry god. The rhetorical choice to suggest the self-reformation of those who had previously considered African Americans brutes instead of human beings, thus, provides a means by which to attain personal salvation.

[xx] William Lloyd Garrison addresses the role of persuasion in the first issue of *The Liberator*: "I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not retreat a single inch—And I WILL BE HEARD. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal, and to hasten the resurrection of the dead" (qtd. In Jin-Ping).

[xxi] See Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (Cooper, Lane. *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1932.

[xxii] See "The Black Letters on the Sign: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Canon" in which Henry Louise Gates writes: "Scholars, including Arnold Rampersad, Werner Sollors, Dickson Bruce, and David Levering Lewis, have debated the origins of Du Bois's use of the concept of 'double consciousness,' but what's clear is that its roots are multiple, which is appropriate enough, just as it is clear that the source of one of Du Bois's other signal metaphors—'the problem of the twentieth-century is the problem of the color line'—came to him directly from Frederick Douglass's essay of that title" (xii-xiv).

[xxiii] I borrow this term from Amy Laurence; see *Echo And Narcissus*.

[xxiv] See Peter Hinks' introduction to Walker's *Appeal*, in which Hinks describes the important relationship between Walker and the city of Boston, particularly Beacon Hill.

[xxv] "In almost every instance of colonial revolt, the white Westerner has had absolutely no inkling of the revolt until it burst over his head, so carefully hidden had the rebels kept their feelings and attitudes. In short, oppression helps forge in the oppressed the very qualities that eventually bring about the downfall of the oppressor" (47). I would add that oppression forges the very qualities, i.e., the inability or unwillingness to listen, in the oppressor that eventually engenders the emancipation of the oppressed.

[xxvi] Most of the quotations in my chapter come from this version of *Native Son* that is reprinted in *Early Works*. Any passages quoted in my chapter that do not appear in the 1991 reprint will be designated with Book-of-the-Month Club in the parenthetical citation.

[xxvii] I have screened the version of the film edited for American audiences (with a running time of 91 minutes and a copyright of 1968). For a discussion of the various versions of the film, see Page Lewis's "Not Everybody's Protest Film, Either: *Native Son* Among Controversial Film Adaptations."
[xxviii] See *Audio-Vision* and *Film, A Sound Art*.
[xxix] The original version of the text published by Book-of-the-Month Club in 1940 reflects slightly different language: "He kissed her again and at once she spoke, not a word, but a resigned and prolonged sound that gave forth a meaning of horror accepted" (219). Still, the use of listening is consistent in both versions of the text.
[xxx] "Uncovering the Magical Disguise of Language: The Narrative Presence in Richard Wright's *Native Son*."
[xxxi] Again, I have screened the American version of *Sangre Negra*, which was close to fifteen minutes shorter than the original Argentine version, due in large part to even more severe censorship.
[xxxii] The close relationship between the trope of listening and reading will be suggested when Jan provides Bigger with pamphlets from the communist party.
[xxxiii] This technique of employing the visual as well as the audial realm is a technique that Michel Chion discusses at length within the context of cinema studies, culminating in a theory that the French film critic dubs the audio-visual contract. See *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*.
[xxxiv] Without the addition of this passage, the reader would be left to wonder how the Daltons' or Peggy, would not smell the smoldering body throughout the house, which a friend of mine, who was teaching the Library of America edition to his high school English class, pointed out to me over dinner one night at an exquisite Ethiopian restaurant in Washington, D.C.
[xxxv] "The second event that spurred me to write of Bigger was more personal and subtle. I had written a book of short stories, which was published under the title of *Uncle Tom's Children*. When the reviews of that book began to appear, I realized that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest" ("How Bigger was Born" 874).
[xxxvi] See *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*.
[xxxvii] e.g., see Precoda and Polanah; see Tanner.
[xxxviii] According to John Russell Taylor, Hitchcock's film is more explicitly indebted to the 1924 murder case than the play by Patrick Hamilton upon which it is based (*Cinema Eye, Cinema Ear*, 188).
[xxxix] Tommy and Brandon's yearning for recognition of their respective murders are not altogether unlike that of Bigger Thomas in Wright's *Native Son*.
[xl] This is one of two significant unmasked cuts in a film noted for its seamless editing, the importance of which I will discuss in greater detail below.

[xli] Similarly, a policeman walking outside Crewe's apartment does not hear Alice's scream in *Blackmail*.
[xlii] Wright begins several novels with acousmatic onomatopoetic sound (e.g., *Native Son* and *Lawd Today!*).
[xliii] While the choice of adjective does not necessarily connote homosexuality, Wright will include other references to homosexuality that begs further comparison between Tommy in *A Father's Law* and the ambiguously gay characters of Phillip and Brandon in *Rope*. Of course, such connotative meaning is related to matters of subjectivity not unlike the interpreted significance of Tommy's typewriter.
[xliv] As I discuss in detail below, Hitchcock concludes *Rope* by representing a former prep school headmaster in a state of cognitive dissonance.
[xlv] The lack of an open quotation mark at the end of this passage [prior to the word *Class*] is one of many indications that Wright only had time to compose a draft manuscript, as he died before he could make revisions. I assume that Julia Wright and Harper Perennial who published the novel in 2008, consciously decided to print the manuscript as is without editing such typos. Nonetheless, this passage indicates Wright's intention to emphasize the role that a university education has on Tommy and the way in which it creates distance between father and son.
[xlvi] It is an agency not unlike that of Alice White in the scene between her, Detective Frank and Tracy the Blackmailer. See Chapter 1 of my dissertation.
[xlvii] See *Cinema-Eye, Cinema-Ear* (188).
[xlviii] Jack Sullivan claims there is outside sound when Phillip and Rupert are talking at the piano after dinner—see *Hitchcock's Music* (23).
[xlix] This mirrors the shift from external reality to subjectivity via Hitchcock's use of the soundtrack in *Blackmail*.
[l] Ironically, Rupert's entrance, unlike that of the other dinner guests attending the party, is not signaled by a doorbell.
[li] I'd like to thank Charlie Scruggs for offering this sage comparison.
[lii] One of the implications of my project is the need for a study of the ways listening is represented and functions in "blind literature," by which I mean literature written by the blind as well as narratives concerned with the subject of blindness.
[liii] While the film, and its characters, ignores Janet's claim in her last clause, I think it is worth unpacking, perhaps in another project in which I focus exclusively on the trope of listening in Feminist Psychoanalysis and Film Studies.
[liv] While the film seems to consist of one long continuous take, it is comprised of eleven long takes. Hitchcock wanted to shoot a film in one long take, but the material restrictions of ten-minute film reels would not allow him to do so (of course, in today's world of digital recording, the film could be shot in one long take). To give the semblance of one long take, most of the cuts from reel to reel are masked. For instance one take ends with a tracking shot that results in a close-up of Brandon's back and the proceeding take begins on the same, all-black image only to track out to a wider shot. Considering Hitchcock's conscious effort to mask most of these cuts, the unmasked cut to Rupert listening to Brandon and Phillip squabble is all the more noteworthy. Minor note:

to this day, the discourse on *Rope* has ranged in estimating as few as four and as many as ten takes. The reason that I identify eleven takes is that I include the original establishing shot of the New York City streetscape with which Hitchcock opens the film.

[lv] Like Chion, I am keenly interested in "sounds and voices that are neither entirely inside nor clearly outside" the diegesis because "it is with these sounds and voices left to wander the surface of the screen that the real and specific power of the cinema comes into play" (*The Voice in Cinema* 4).

[lvi] See: William Rothman's *Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze* and Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze that she discusses in her classic essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

[lvii] In this sense, David's father is not altogether unlike Ruddy in *A Father's Law*.

[lviii] See Ward's review of Wright's novel in *African American Review* (520).

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